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Wider Than A Mile

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A Thesis

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by

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To my parents who always said to try new things
even when they knew I might.

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Table of Contents

Abstract

"I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear."

--Joan Didion

The following collage of essays is the author's attempt to frame memoir from a disparate collection of pieces. She believes that Didion's quote describes her own motivation for writing.

The umbrella themes include risk-taking, memories, and food. Some of the subthemes entail family, sex, teaching, traveling, breast cancer, natural disasters, dark humor, self-discovery, and social justice.

The author experiments with form, conjecture, philosophy, facts, interviews, lists, letters, second person, foreign words, allusions, lower-case letters, verb tense, images, one-sentence pieces, dialogue, convoluted syntax, parallel structures. narrative voice, research, segments, synchronicity, definitions, journals, scene, and imitation in her personal and lyrical essays.

Some of the literary influences of the author include David Sedaris, Barbara Kingsolver, Loren Eiseley, Annie Dillard, and Mary Oliver.

The Breasts of a Tall Woman
or Why I Write

The reaction to trauma reflects so much of what it means to be a human being. Leo Tolstoy tells us that any idiot can face a crisis, but that it is the everyday living that wears us out, but I think what matters, what separates us from sheep, goats, monkeys, and mean people in the presence of horror is the presence and degree of grace. Very few people in our lives ask us to understand this concept, this rising to the occasion. We can't practice reacting to bad news. It comes, not like an approaching train with whistles and multiple cars and long wooden arms halting our approach, but instead like a squirt in the face from a surreal clown with the plastic flower on his wide lapel who previously seemed too far away to do unimaginable harm, riding an absurd toy train with no sounds and no smoke.

Since being diagnosed with breast cancer in 2005, I have had four surgeries and thirty-three days of radiation. At the first mammogram after the burns under my arm had healed, the radiology technician said that everything seemed fine. I exhaled and there was sweetness and light as far as I could survey.

"But," she said with a too serious tone, "You have something else."

Icy ball in my stomach. Sweat forming over my lip. Don't bite it. Don't cry. No moisture. Incoming. Bad News. Infinity in a moment. No oxygen. Struggle to inhale. Terror.

Profuse sweat. Freezing body. Bodily functions in check--fluids and gases. Wishes and dreams. Duck and cover.

She must have noticed my face, a melting, blotchy mask of Impressionist good manners. Then she added, "You have the breasts of a tall woman." I stared, incredulous. What?

She repeated her proclamation. Then she smiled. I did not smile. And then she smiled wider, trying to be comforting in some kind of macabre raven-over-the-door way. I tried to exhale. I squinted through tears of relief. I tried to inhale. Still there was no spit in my mouth for a good fifteen minutes. All I could do was nod and smile and smile and nod, dressed in the attractive white waffled fabric that was my robe.

A week later, I told my oncologist/surgeon about this new diagnosis.

What? He had never heard of the breasts of a tall woman, and he has seen more than his fair share every day for years. He was even more offended than I at the glib tongue of the technician, wreaking damage to my flashing mental health sign, somewhere at the intersection of Death, Be Not Proud and Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.

We English teachers know what to call our crossroads whether we stop to die or go on living. We can be Guinevere or Grendel. We can be Vivian Bearing or Voldemort. We can be Ophelia or Oedipus, Siddhartha or Stella, Icarus or Isolde. We can be Jane Bennet or Jem

Finch, Medea or Marlow. We know all about choosing our nightmares: we choose not to be known only by our scars.

Writing comes after living with and through a tornado, parenting, death. I have lived through divorce, ice storms, breast cancer, jobs, betrayal, dementia, burnt cooking, earthquakes, teaching, juvenile diabetes, lust, bigotry, being lost, and the evils of math. This catalog, while autobiographical, is not listed in any particular chronological order. The essays in this piece occur in chronological order, I would like to think, to show noble resilience through an archetypal journey. I am more apt to believe, and my family and friends would agree, the order shows ornery stubbornness and luck.

Life does not come in order of the crises you can accept. Ask that Tolstoy guy and his bud, John Lennon: Life is what happens when you're making other plans. Besides, if chaos is not happening to me or you, it is happening to somebody you love or a total stranger.

So what is the antidote for confronting fear and trauma--the refiguring of the lungs to take in a free breath and to exhale with some regularity? Sometimes I cannot stop long enough to tell myself or discuss the answer with my friends or even strangers. I am working on that. But I can tell you what to consider: Keep Amazingly Busy. Before relinquishing your body

fluids to the abyss called the unknown or the bathroom toilet or the coffin: hide from death. Drink, screw, and sleep with abandon. Recover. Write.

My grandmother said that anyone who could cook was well. I believed her most of the time. My friend's grandmother said to put on a little lipstick and things would look much brighter. Of course, she also said that she would rather see the crack in her ass than the crack in her granddaughter's toes and to get over it and to put on some real cute shoes.

Sometimes, you can't just "get over it," but in the meantime when it is a mean time, I think what my grandmother really meant was to think about something else, do something else, anything else--knitting, listening, kissing, walking, singing, baking, loving, gardening, dancing, planning, talking, buying cute shoes, cooking, and eating. She did not mention drinking and screwing or sleeping. She did not mention writing. But after an assault on the body, writing takes us to the other side of the breath. It is the ability to inhale again, a salve on the radiated psyche.

I am, perhaps, 5 foot 3 inches on a good day. I have the breasts of a tall woman--whatever they are or are not. Breast cancer, like any disease, is terrible. Its effects can be out there, obvious, even if only to the woman under her own clothes. While society tries its mightiest, on television and in every magazine ad, it cannot define women by their cup sizes.

We are bigger than our chests full of breast tissue, linens, and hope. Instead of stuffing our bras and our egos, we stuff our heads and our hearts with things we can control and change: our awareness, our attitudes, and the number of years before researchers find a cure.

And we have to practice this living business, these choices, before and after we get breasts and before and after we get sick. We write about the practice of doing better than the day before. Not perfect, better. I do not believe that my grandmother would approve of this chronological collection of essays. She believed that people should keep their own counsel. But creative nonfiction writers don't do that.

In my writing my cups runneth over.

In the Time of Food

1955 Birth. Drink mother's milk.

1958 Tricycle days. Eat one-half cricket. Mother pulls out other half.

1955-58 Day care, no such thing. Listen and revere Italian grandparents, aunts, great-grandmothers, cooking all day—no English. Visit grandfather's grocery next to Stax Records. A butcher, he stands in bloody sawdust all day and brings slabs of meat home in crisp white paper. Eat produce from family farm not inherited by my grandmother because she is the youngest girl and the only girl born in America.

1958 Little sister born. Mother stays home. Dinner on the table at 6:00 from that time until last night, balanced and color-coordinated.

1961 Mother goes back to teaching kindergarten. Insists on nutritious snacks. One of my kindergarten pals, Andy, sits next to me. Marries Kate, one of Charlie's Angels. His mother, Stella Stevens, kisses Elvis in the movies. Can reach the water fountain, but the temperature equals or surpasses my bathwater. Nuns distribute ice cream in paper cups with flat wooden spoons. Do not notice fat content = 94 million percent. The school milk comes frozen in the carton. Can get out thousands of souls in purgatory if I drink it. Souls out = 11.

1965 Receive cookbook for birthday gift. Learn to make muffins. Eat new candy, SweeTARTS. Makes tongue bleed and turn purple.

1966 Contend with mean boy at lunch. Makes fun of celery and carrots in my sack lunch every day. Shows me mustard on his tongue. Stupid cootie head.

1969 Visit California to see American grandmother. Eat scrambled eggs with vanilla. Taste new soft drink, Fresca. Go the Silver Bells dance with boy who has stopped teasing me about my lunch. Asks me to go steady. Drops me like a hot potato.

1970 First real boyfriend. Make shrimp with garlic sauce. Learn a head of garlic does not equal a clove of garlic. House smells for months. Grow bosoms.

1972 Second boyfriend. His family eats fast food like KFC. Grills barbequed pork steaks every Saturday night. Mother thinks this food is low class like them.

1973 Third boyfriend. He introduces me to yogurt, granola, Chinese food from a restaurant. His sweat tastes like blueberries.

1977 Marry the chicken and barbeque guy. Eat turtle soup and fried quail in a potato nest at Commander's Palace in New Orleans on the honeymoon. Stand in line fourteen hours to see the King Tut exhibit.

1978 Graduate Assistantship in the English department at University of Memphis. Eat omelets and cornbread at university cafeteria. Kitchen ladies smirk at my tray.

1978 First job teaching high school. Drink double Martinis--with two giant olives--every day after school. Scoop ice cream with the wrong man. Learn all about scooping. Practice scooping with fervor. Jettison Ice Cream Man and his wife.

1980 Earn MA in Linguistics. Visit Europe. Scarf down best Chinese food in London. Order thin pizza in Venice, baked in spite of the cooks running around trying to watch soccer finals. Find *cornichons* and brandy in the *fois gras* in France. Jettison KFC husband.

1982 Slurp oysters with photographer in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Learn to eat cold avocado soup and chilled scallop *mousseline* and strawberries and cream in Montreal. Start and end the year at 104 pounds.

1984 Marry the photographer. Pour Chamboise into the champagne-filled flutes at the wedding. Make aioli for the reception with close friend, a food stylist. Receive news that mother-in-law chunked the crystal punch cups at my father after we left for Cape Cod honeymoon. Learn that my father ducks and remains unharmed. Second high school teaching job in inner city.

1989 Golden Retriever dies. Reconsider the whole baby idea: maybe I will love a baby as much as that dog. Cafeteria women feed me extra fried fish. Have baby. Amazed. Love the baby more than that dog. Read Linda McCartney's book. Become a vegetarian--eat nothing with a face. Eat nothing that screams when it dies.

1992 Move to third high school teaching job. Teach theatre. Eat cookies at rehearsals. Get first cavity. Learn that the phrase, *cunt, you are not worth killing* means the marriage is in deep *kim chi*. Worry about clothes being burned in the front yard. Discover keyboard from computer missing. Arrive late to class many times because of car blocked by a body, standing, arms folded across chest.

1994 Ice Storm. City paralyzed. Out of house for eight days; husband still wanted birthday cake. Tornado strikes school, kills three people in neighborhood. Teacher next door says that bad things happen to bad people. Child gets Type I Diabetes. Measure every bit of food. Think about her food + her time every second of the day and night. Start counseling and playwriting. Playwriting is less expensive and better therapy. Stop going to counseling.

1999 Divorce Oyster Man. Lose appetite for 180 pounds of husband, the food photographer, and his lover, my ex-friend, the 90-pound food stylist, equaling 270 pounds of excess weight.

2001 Marry last husband = stupid head boy (see 1966 and 1969). Adds five sons to the table. Boys devour pizza at midnight. Relieve the planet of gallons of milk and boxes of cereal gone in one day. Watch this non-Italian husband make homemade pasta and spaghetti gravy my grandmother thinks is the closest to hers. Stunned.

2001 Grandmother dies--best cook (not just Italian food) in the universe. Deliver eulogy. Remind hundreds of people her salad dressing tasted like dessert.

2002 Order *saganaki, calimari, tapas* in Greektown in Chicago. Eat at Tuscany's on Clark Street across from Wrigley Field on one of our honeymoons: butternut squash raviolas with sage and brown butter sauce. Gall bladder taken out.

2006 Get three surgeries and get radiated thirty-four times because of breast cancer diagnosis in 2005. Question oncologist. Says it could have been caused by eating an unwashed apple.

2007 Accepted into MFA program in Creative Writing at UNO. Food = Comfort. Weigh this much before: yes, but I had a new baby the next day. Read *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver. Write to her cheese maker. Receive cheese making ingredients and instructions in the mail. Major fail at making mozzarella cheese. Do not admit this to any members of Italian family.

2008 Visit France, Italy, and Spain. Write and eat. Eat and write. Eat mussels, *gelato*, seven-course lunches with wine in the cafeteria at the winegrowers' college in Montpellier, *paella* in La Camargue, *pain au chocolat* at dawn in Paris. Tour vineyard where the families have pimped out their children for centuries to offer bread and cheese making patrons thirsty for the wine they sell. Feed mine to their latest black dog. Leave through the chapel where they hid their books and wine from the Nazis behind secret doors. Get lost in Barcelona.

2009 Pursue sushi addiction at Lee's Gas Station in Memphis. First trip to inner Mexico: San Miguel de Allende. Learn to clean and cook cactus, make guacamole, eat *churros*, savor Spanish hot chocolate, add beans with *queso fresco* and *chilequiles* to breakfast possibilities. Miss the *jugo verde* every damn day.

2010 Recreate recipe for spicy mayonnaise for sushi and for *jugo verde*. Decide that Barbara Kingsolver is patron saint of growing, cooking, and eating. Husband decides Mario Batali is a god. Plants only twenty tubs of tomatoes, peppers, and herbs for summer garden. Drives forty miles to find thick cactus pads for jugo verde even though he has never tasted it. Write about food every day. Get two essays taken by *Edible Memphis* about funeral food in the South and children picking their own food from local farms. Write essay on Mario Batali's sex life. Forget to tell husband.

Summer 2010 Return to Mexico. For some reason must take husband. Learns enough Spanish to ask women in our hotel kitchen for the recipe for *jugo verde: nopales*,

cucumber, parsley, celery, fresh cold orange juice. Eat Oaxaca cheese and hot greasy *empanadas* stuffed with ephemeral squash blossoms. Crush Mexican chocolate in the *molcajete* for thick brown mole. Eat *tortilla espanola* decorated with a smiley face of pimentos and green olives. Steep dried hibiscus flowers for deeply red *te de Jamaica*. Watch the man with the machete at the *mardes mercado* strike, trim, drain, sculpt, sack entire hairy coconut. Ask *maitre d'* at The Restaurant in San Miguel many questions in bad Spanish during a long dinner. Hear him exclaim--You Are Foodies!

Future Make grandmother smile down from heaven on our markets, our pantry, our oven, our table, our plates, and on our guests. Filling us.

Wider Than A Mile

In the South, we call our fathers, *Daddy*, until they die; even grown men do. When I want to irritate my parents, I call them by their first names. In fact I have done that since college. Several of us in my college sorority thought we would go home one weekend and start calling our parents by their first names: Bob and Dorothy, Hilda and Bill, Norma and Dominic. They must have known we meant business when we tried to forego the familiar and ventured straight for the first names.

Bob and Dorothy were not fond of this practice at my house in 1973. But they played along so as not to rock the boat. They also worked full-time jobs, mowed the grass, cleaned the house, prepared large dinners for family, paid the bills on time, ate at very few restaurants, sewed, bought items with cash, paid off their houses and cars, and put money away for emergencies.

I am lucky in that most of the people in my life have been more than a little dependable. They say what they are going to do, and then they do it. They do not honor the struggle or the process of accomplishing a task. They just want to know that it is done: putting one foot in front of the other in spite of heat, religion, illness, family background,

disaster. Get up and keep going. For Catholics, their Protestant work ethic is extreme. Their one flaw is that they rarely, if ever, try new things themselves.

My parents have reared both of their daughters with the mantra "try new things." Of course these new adventures had to be on the approved list: piano, ballet, tennis, girl scouts, biking around the block. Included on the not-approved list: non-Catholic boys, short skirts, fishnet hose, pierced ears, sleepovers, skateboards, walking to the store, motorcycles, and later in life, travelling. We delivered ourselves from temptation without knowing what it was until we graduated from college. We stayed at home unless we were with a group of people from school or church. My parents believed that this plan would authenticate our virtue. The plan was a complete failure. We had very few skills to handle horror. We never practiced turning from it.

One of my friends told me that all of them knew my ex-husband was wrong for me, but that was because I had neither seen nor experienced evil before. I remember being embarrassed by this lack of sophistication, the failure to be one with the dark side, the big pink load of naïveté. He could plan a great trip, though.

I blame this anxiety about traveling on my grandmother who died in 2001, but who continues to dominate the should's and should not's of our family's trips to the next room,

around town, and throughout the world. When anyone in our family goes anywhere (car, plane, bus, train, ship), we are called gypsies, and not in a pretty-colored-skirt kind of way. The promise of travel is met with huffing and eye rolling and tisking and ominous portents for dismal futures because we are wasting time and spending money we need for important things. The allotment of cash for the extras is a frivolous act. Paying for essentials comes before exploring the willful road to unnecessary excess. My grandmother could travel because her house was paid for; therefore, my parents and their descendants could not hope to travel until they were all old enough to retire from sensible jobs. By that time she hoped she would be dead. She would be thrilled to realize her ominous reach extends beyond the grave when her voice comes out of my mother's mouth.

I get my genes of extreme resistance from both sides of my family. Since my mother did and does not fly and my American grandmother lived in California, we drove from Memphis to Riverside, California three times when I was growing up, the journey taking three days. We planned the trips in secret because of the threat of family outcries, including my grandmother's taking to her bed for days, predicting heart failure, an extended hospital stay, drugged unconsciousness, and certain death.

The first time we took the trip, I was five and my sister was two. We drove in our green Plymouth with a swamp cooler hung on one of the windows in the back seat, its hot water condensation dripping out onto the street or on me when I pushed my little finger through the rubbery crack. My great-grandmother, who spoke no English, knew that we would be crossing the desert in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and California. She wailed prayers over us in Italian, weeping over the three most predictable reasons for our sure and imminent demise: thirst and tarantulas and Indians. She and my grandfather (my grandmother was moaning in the bed) loaded up that car with toilet paper, jugs of water, bags of oranges, and the certainty that they would never see us again. I believe they gave my father cash money for the ransom we would surely need in exchange for our lives.

Of course, three weeks later, they did see us return, welcoming us home, admonishing my parents that they would for certain stay home for the rest of their lives after that crazy escapade, endangering the lives of children who looked a little too tanned and too happy to be contained for the rest of their lives.

We took my aunt on one of those trips westward, as well. She had just graduated from high school in 1961, and California was her present. She saw that Painted Desert, and she saw freedom. Kept from the horrors of rock music, she could only listen to Pat Boone

and Perry Como and Andy Williams whose music became a velvet beacon, not a cautionary tale, and after that, moss never grew under her feet; nothing was ever enough to keep her satisfied to stay at home again.

> *Moon River, wider than a mile . . .*
> *Oh, dream maker, you heart breaker,*
> *wherever you're going I'm going your way . . .*
> *There's such a lot of world to see . . . .* (lyrics by Johnny Mercer)

Of course no one reminded my great-grandmother, Teresa Gatti Gallina, that she took two or three little trips of her own, from Italy to the New World. On the first trip, she traveled with her husband to Argentina to help design the railroads in South America. Then she went back to Northern Italy. The second time she travelled, she came to Memphis, but did not like it here, and she returned home to Bassignana, near Alessandria. Then she ventured forth a third time to America as a widow with two little boys. The Catholic nuns were mean to her here in Memphis, and she changed her mind about the nasty behavior of the self-righteous clergy, worshipping at the First Baptist church until she died at 90. She imported the interior wood from Brazil for the windows, doors, stairs and bookcases, and she built a house on a hill on a street where, she believed, southern Italians should and could not live. She built her house next to American Methodists who

had no intention of being neighbors with ethnic foreigners. She had no idea that people in the United States put all Italians together like spaghetti and meatballs, a dish she did not even know how to cook. On visiting days, other than relatives, only southern Italians came to the door.

We resist staying in one place. Stasis is not a good fit for us. We cook to stave off the anger of being confined even if for short periods of time. We pick ourselves up and go to the grocery store. We make new mistakes. In the same places. In new places.

Significant Holes

Nobody really thinks about holes because nobody knows what they're missing. In my grandmother's neighborhood that we traveled to for supper every Wednesday night and for dinner and supper every Sunday for eleven years, our green Plymouth would pass a doughnut shop. It had plate glass on two sides to accommodate all the splayed hands and smushed up faces of those who wanted to watch the floured assembly line at work, an olfactory of dough. Sometimes, from inside the car, we could smell the doughnuts even with the windows rolled up. When the conveyor belt was not moving, that was sad because then the woman in the white hat and white uniform with her name on the pocket shoved cold doughnuts in the sack, no show to be had. Most of the time the conveyor belt was whirring, whirring, and the doughnut dough spiraled through the intricacies of physics: motion, friction, gravity, and gears. The dough would lie flat yet move through a series of bolted belts that pushed through the dough, leaving a puckered hole. Then the doughy rafts dropped into deep rivers of hot lard to fry up, drain, and gather at the next station where gluey, cracked-when-you-touched-it glaze was sprayed onto them in a warm even rain of sugar. These doughnuts made a child see voices and taste colors. My favorite kind was powdered sugar, but my little sister enjoyed cinnamon twists. No fillings or chocolate or sprinkles for me. My sugar was pure. I was considering this work as a

profession: doughnut creator, the person with the best job in the world, even with the hairnets. But one existential question lingered: where did the dough go when they punched out the holes?

One day my father answered this question by placing a bag in my lap at the house of my grandmother.

What is this?

I reached into the bag with my seven-year-old hand and smelled a doughnut, but I couldn't find one to pick up, not really. I took out a doughnut hole that was cold to the touch and cold to the palate. It was a second-rate treat, defective, a second-hand store sale item, a flea-market failure, a disappointment.

They sell them? At the same place?

These are the punched out parts? Were they ever sold hot? You're not sure?

I handed the bag to my clueless sister because evidently donut holes were a snack to give to a little kid with an uneducated palate. It was some time before I realized that she knew the value of something small. But it was something else again to realize that if adults did not know the answers to simple important questions, what else didn't they know?

Holes, there were, in that illogical assumption.

Pack of Cigarettes

On the first day of my first class of my first teaching position in 1978, I walk around the classroom, checking on student supplies, books, pens, folders, on the worn wooden desks, graffitied with the tongues of KISS and the Rolling Stones, too soon for the thrills of Michael Jackson.

The tall kid in the third row, black and thirteen, slouches in his seat and does not notice that I notice a pack of cigarettes, Marlboro's, on the corner of his desk. The Catholic all-girl high school that I graduated from did not allow cigarettes on the desks. This must be an obvious confrontation to my authority.

Students can smoke if they bring a note from their parents, a rule that I do not know until the second day of class. The boys stand under the smoky haze of the band teacher whose yellow fingers and ghoulish eyes beckon for them to cough right along with him before school and in between classes, flaunting their packs of cigarettes, laughing under the slanted roof of the ROTC building. Nice girls do not take him up on this opportunity. Instead, they choose to taste their soothing brown Virginia Slims in the smooth coolness of the tiled bathrooms and the mirrors, graffitied in the dark shards of Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath.

I rush to pick up the pack. By golly, I will show them my mightiness. This, I wave in his face, breaks school rules. Come get the pack of cigarettes after class. He says nothing, no argument, no rage. He glides back to his desk like a shark, his black eyes glassy, calm, empty.

The students hear my lesson on identity: having one, finding one, keeping one. After hearing the plan that will surely shape them into finer human beings for all time, they leave, moved by a bell that beckons them, perhaps, to other far-reaching ideas, to heaven or to hell. My reach does not extend past the bell. It does not even extend into the hall.

The young man lingers and skulks up to my desk where I stand close to the left-hand drawer, the one that squeaks open and shut and sticks when anyone pulls it too fast or too slow. I say, Look, I think I'll keep this pack of cigarettes and take them home to my father (who only smokes pipes). This way you learn a valuable lesson. My grandfather died from smoking these things. They put a hole in his throat, and he put his cigarettes through the hole to keep smoking them. My grandmother still cries for him. Your grandmother will do the same if you keep this up. The next time I will call your father. Now, go to class.

I believe, at 22 years of age and 125 pounds, wearing the white skirt and the white tennis shoes and the white puka beads, that I can change the lives of children forever.

He comes close to me, his breath a sour mix of tobacco and Fritos. He shoves me aside, his massive paw moving my shoulder and my body away from where he needs to be. I do not fall down. He opens the drawer as easily as some orderly will open the drawer in the morgue that holds his bloody body three years later after his father guns him down. He grabs the pack of cigarettes, closes the drawer, and walks out before anyone else can walk in. He tells no one. I tell no one.

Later that year, he hands over the pack of cigarettes to the assistant principal in the big office. After being given twenty smacks with the paddle, he flies over the desk, crashing into the wall.

His pack of cigarettes, camouflaged by the shortened, cut-to-size white sticks of regular cigarettes, their golden filters packed tight on the top, hides his stash of joints on the bottom. He does not need for me to give this pack of wordless cigarettes to my father or anyone else's. It cannot go down like that.

On the second day, he returns to class as if nothing had happened. The first day does not exist to him, this existential man. The day before, a not-so-tall woman started her day at school as a tough savior and ended the day as a roughed-up outsider.

From that time to this, I choose my battles. I did not, do not, will not fall down.

Lust

i'm not sure about it until it happens twenty more times, the visceral tension from across the room, the smoke-smelting i think i see, but i look away again and again. i peer back with a wincing smile, looking behind me as if he has made some heinous mistake. i understand the word smolder for the first time because i am sure the people in between us, even the ones who mill around and talk about nothing in clotted conversations about utility bills and recalcitrant children and negligible tax refunds, notice a scarlet wet rise of temperature in the vodkaed room and feel the fingers of heat grabbing across their boredom to me, despite his being a republican, despite his sansabelt pants, despite his being fifteen years older, despite his being a geometry teacher (for god's sake), despite his love of country music. despite his not being the high school boyfriend.

his eyes, those bluer-than-black-ice eyes, make me drip and take chance after chance after inventing new ways to move after waffles in their bed, before and after school, after bad presents like porcelain statues and neck scarves meant for another generation of women, after ice cream, after he fixes my car by just filling up the water tank, after greasy chinese food, after his list of

honey-do chores, after night school in parks and in parking lots in neighborhoods that i don't travel to in daylight hours.

his eyes make me forget every sleepy homily, every rosary bead, every religion class, every catholic school, every prayer i said for each blurred ambulance, every asian soul in purgatory, every holy card, every sticky scapula, every manufactured sin in confession, every memorized penance.

i scream to and for the stars in his gold chevy pickup, the metal ribs on the floor of its flatbed sticking in my back, bruising my tail-bone muscles, teaching me to look up at myriad constellations, move my pain toward the screaming that scares the lightening bugs up up toward the bigger light like comets captured in street lamps and down down to the smaller closer flicker of my backup tail lights.

he screams down while thousands, maybe millions of mosquitoes dive in and out and eat me alive, me wondering but not caring about malaria, wondering but not caring about the flames of danteworld in circle two, licking every part of me on fiery ice in circle nine.

i wonder but do not care about the levels of pain i remember from that first time on the cold formica of the kitchen counter, not caring even though the maid from next door, the one with three fingers who could still hold and peel a potato, watches through the barely-curtained window, us moving to the cold linoleum floor and then over to the rough gold, brown and tan couch that America issued to everyone in the suburbs that year.

after taking a shower, while he trudged back to his sturdy ladder and painted up and down the outside slats of my small white house, i wait. his wife, the sullen haint, drives in from Mississippi and my husband, the dull saint, flies in from London. i get a maid out of that deal.

one day these two dismal people will call each other on the telephone: accusing, denying, finger pointing, questioning, and blaming the next unnatural and uneven thing on us. and the next.

and when it was over, not until another year later, he said he might have left his wife if he had just known he was my second lover. at 26, i was an approximate virgin, and he was a booster shot that inoculates women like me for all time against a chronic bout of the stupids.

she notices her husband's thinning lips and his missing chin. they watch the television over a silent sensible dinner about the public humiliations of a senator from south carolina who gives up everything for his beloved lover in argentina. kindred spirits, they are dead ringers. she steals a long hard look at him, checking to see if he exhales with jealous empathy, if he feels a blood connection with this man, if he still loves someone who lives far away, if he still regrets asking her, the wife, for a divorce thirty years ago, and then, when she sees his stoic christianized mask, she must have to turn away to call their son and his family.

ethan frome, in edith wharton’s novel, tries to escape cold tedium and loveless oppression by crashing his sled with his lover aboard into a tree after a winter storm. we had no sled.

we drove away in opposite directions.

Seven Eleven

When she walked into the convenience store, the substitute teacher didn't realize that the man standing behind the cash register had just killed the clerk who was supposed to be standing behind the cash register. She just wanted a refill for her coffee. She wondered if the coffee was fresh, fresh and hot. He took the stolen gun from his book bag, pointed it, and he shot her. The bullet, just as bullets are wont to do when they scrape helmets in war, did not drive itself into her head but instead made a path around the skeletal bone of her skull, ripping up all of her hair and skin like a metal plow through cracked playground dirt. She would be in the hospital for two months, and after she returned to school, the substitute teacher received a written reprimand for leaving her Math class, her desk, and the building without permission.

Before the substitute teacher walked into the convenience store, the boy didn't realize that someone might mistake him for the clerk who was supposed to be standing behind the cash register. He took a quick glance at his feet at the dead man, the blood from whose chest was creeping, with some urgency, with surging red wetness, toward his tennis shoes. The blood moved toward his Black Sabbath book bag that he received for his fifteenth birthday, for which, if it got messed up, dirty, or lost, his mother would kill him. He heard the young woman say,

good morning, is the coffee fr----. He waved the gun at her, and she began to back up into the door, the tinny, gurgling bell ringing when someone, anyone, walked in or, except her, out. He pointed the gun and he shot her.

But the man on the floor and the woman on the floor, both still, still did not allow the cash register to open without a gasping, whispered hint of the correct sequence of arbitrary numbers. And the man with the ephemeral touch, who was only a blond boy with a borrowed gun, had nothing else to do but go back to school to turn in the homework that I had assigned to him in English class the day before.

Ticket to Paradise

You a witch.

My students call me that sometimes.

Crouch down. Put your French books on top of your heads. The tornado will fly over the school. You will be safe. Your French books will keep you safe. You'll see. Please stop screaming. Yes, you can pray if you want to. Your French books will keep all of you safe.

Then the roars of a thousand trains. And the screaming of over one thousand children. Safe underground in the basement of the school built long ago as the place for a swimming pool for the rich children who were supposed to swim there forever, but left empty for the Black children who hide there today. Today the rushing sounds overhead stopped. The students took the books they clutched off their heads. And then they looked at me.

You a witch.

I want to believe it happened today because my eyes change colors. My hazel eyes turn gray or blue or green or even violet like Elizabeth Taylor. If I can just fall asleep, I can dream of other things besides Liz and her eyes. I wonder what keeps her up at night? When I wear a purple sweater, my eyes turn so green, they scare the children at school. Even the rough ones avert their eyes, keep walking. My eyes scare me when I sleep, if I sleep.

My eyes never turn the color of the Montana sky, that blue color, that Popsicle blue that I never eat except when my ice cream man is out of grape. The blue of the sky does not exist in nature on earth. It's manufactured and American, a color you can only smell. Today at school, the sky was blue like that. Too blue. And then yellow and then brown. And we could smell water and dust, rushing towards us. Even in the basement.

Sometimes I think it would be advantageous to be a witch: cast spells, cause warts, burn barns. Basements aren't the same as barns. Batman has a basement, doubling as a cave and a closet. Nobody has a basement like Batman. He slides down the pole and gets into his Bat suit on the way down. How does he change his clothes back? He can't walk through the front door. He can't slide back up.

In sixth grade, Sister Mary Placide said thinking about Batman and his pole was one of the impure thoughts that I had to confess on Thursday mornings. I just wanted to see if I could change into my uniform a little faster. Saddle oxfords take a long time to polish, squeeze on while they're wet, and tie. People can't slide back up. Humans can't slide backwards. Men can't change the laws of gravity.

Damn. Just fall asleep.

I don’t know why men collect toy trains. I know why men chase big ones: to beat tons of rushing steel, to go faster than some inordinate speed. Men do not believe the laws of physics were made for them. The trains under the Christmas tree that don’t go anywhere are as mysterious as the trains that fill up a bedroom, an attic, a baby's room, or a bat cave. Is it the controlling of small universes? Is it the pulling and pushing of switches, the placing of trees, the building of stations? Stay on track! Do men expect crashes to wreck lives and create civilizations? Do they set up the crash, watch the crash and then ignore the clean up after the crash? Is war just another series of crashes that go boom? Are any soldiers faster than any speeding bullets? Can Superman beat the train that Batman rides?

Stop this. Just fall asleep.

Women, even the veiled ones, if men let them, would go to the ends of the earth to avoid crashes. We don’t send our lovers, husbands, cousins, brothers, fathers or sons to the ends of the earth. Someone else does. And now they send women to implode among explosions in far away places. Women avoid crashes, but men look for them, and when they can’t find them, they build them. When men can’t explain their troubles and they can’t construct a crash, they search for witches. We can will away tornadoes. We cannot will away the crush of trains or the curse of rushing men.

Go to sleep. Take your tongue . . .

Men proved women to be witches using two tests. If a woman, especially one with property that some man wanted, did not boo-hoo when she heard the story of the Virgin Mary, grieving over the body of Jesus, then that accusation made her a witch. She could be real sad about Mary and her dead son, but older women do not have as many active tear ducts and cannot cry easily. And because they cannot cry on command, that physiological anomaly made them automatic contenders for the second test: quick swims in deep icy rivers. See, if she sinks and drowns, she is NOT a witch. Oops! Sorry! But she does win that damp ticket into paradise. If she somehow manages to float, she is a witch because no one teaches girls to swim, and then they burn her. Or hang her if she lives in America. She loses no matter what.

Magic or the threat of magic killed millions of young and old women this smoky way for centuries. When our only career options then were mother, virgin, whore, or witch, this parachute became heavy with their drink much too quick, and like Ophelia's dress, pulled us from our melodious lay to muddy death. This path, though moist, seems like a viable option on some days, inviting, allowing eternal sleep at last.

Please. Take your tongue off the roof of the mouth. Relax. Yes. Just fall asleep.

I was teacher who saved children with their own textbooks. I willed them to be safe and dry. I was not the woman who stayed brave and did not cry. I stayed with those kids without a book over my head. Those gals who stood around the crucifixion site? They misinterpreted the cause of death: not nails in hands, not crowns on heads, not crosses on shoulders, not spears in sides, but instead water in lungs, drowning in body fluids. Drowning. They cried big time. But they were alone under the cross, up on the hill. No guys lined up to give out big bear hugs or tissues at the funeral home. Those disciples were hiding.

If I didn't want to look down at the face of a boy in a coffin, dead because he might have tried to beat a train, I still knew that the boy who lost the race with the train was my cousin. I did not cry because I was too tired to engage. I was too distanced just like on any other day. I was far away in my head. My family was far away in their hearts. Because my cousin was not Ophelia. He was Anna Karenina, one who willfully sought his own salvation, rushing with his car toward the train instead of using his head.

If I didn't cry when a boy was killed by a train, a boy I played with on the family farm or sat next to at the children's table at Thanksgiving or whose sister I stayed awake with until 3 o'clock in the morning, listening to a new 45 of Ray Charles singing "Hit the Road, Jack" thirty

times on a record player while he slept in the next room, years of many nights will pass before I can fall sleep on the first or thirtieth try.

What are you thinking? Go to . . . It happened so many . . .

Who wouldn't lie awake at night worrying about the Romans killing your son, the sanctimonious drowning and charring of your tearless and soaked ancestors, the North Vietnamese killing your friend's brother, European trains taking your children to death camps, your students' mamas boyfriends raping the little girls in the house, a house with no books to protect them except the phone book.

Like railroad cars, one behind the other, these visions connect and lock on endless tracks in the night. I do not hear the brakes. I do not feel the trains stop sometimes until dawn when the alarm clock next to the bed flashes and clangs so that school bells and fire drill bells and tornado warning sirens can keep me awake all throughout the day.

I know why women wave to engineers: to blow the whistle even though they do not know us, sitting at intermittent crossroads. Engineers wave if women are 5 or 20 or 45 or 91, if we are virgins, whores, mothers, teachers, scientists, accountants, or even witches.

Trains pass us at mindless speeds or at soporific crawls: many cars lumber with their heavy loads at all hours of the night. The bloody crossing arms wave up and down, their

whistles crying from far away. Trains hit and miss boys, search for children, head for trestles over marshes and shallows and sleep.

blacktop

four o'clock, may 27, the back parking lot of any southern suburban high school. cars and big-ass trucks park amid rising heat, pervasive and corrosive, where you hear screams of "sorry about your dick" to the drivers of the wide-wheeled, deer-antlered, fish pole-leaning, skoal-sucking, dog-head-nodding-on-the-dashboard, football-playing geniuses who, on this last day of school, whoop it up like smaller gods swatting green-eyed flies, swearing to start the first day of summer vacation with renewable tanned girls in their beer-soaked backseats since blowjobs keep their consciences christian-clear, using all the virgin tricks to keep those hymens in their tight little places, steamy acts that their mommas refuse to do so that their daddies, so so misunderstood at home in their gated communities, come to us downtown after work where we wait in cool sleek high-rises or in midtown bungalows with open shaded porches, nodding and lamenting about the oppressive humidity, waiting inside with cheese straws and dirty martinis, ice-bowled, awash with the glazed promise of dripping sweat and moon-spiced powder, clinging to our lingerie that do not stay folded neatly in the drawer, unlike the annual couples weekends to st. louis with the church casserole club and the matching flannel jammies and cement robe ensemble, *dontchaknow*, but instead ours fall and stay puddled on the floor until the smothered boredom of righteous women in their battened-down mansions and the climbing mileage of their

rushing V-8 engines on the highways get screamed away, spraying denials like perfumed exhaust so pervasive so corrosive that the damn angels choke, making tennessee williams so so willing to whisper that all of them believe the lavender mendacities of their rising yet quelled desires time and time again.

A Library Remembered

I was dreaming the night after the tornado hit. A wide ledge stood where my classroom wall used to be and the students, laughing and screaming, jumped off it one by one. I stood at the bottom, waving at them to go back, trying to catch them when they fell.

There was a great line from *The Catcher in the Rye* about that terrible vision, but I could not find it because the book was blown away from Houston High School in the tornado of 1994. I was blown away by my classroom being blown away.

In comparison to the loss of life and home down the street, I just lost a bunch of paper. It could all be replaced. I was lucky. The teachers, staff and students were not hurt, and what could have been a horrific body count was averted by the storm coming on a holiday weekend, "so foul and fair a day." There but for the grace of God . . .

Still, like Lady Macbeth, I felt "doubtful joy." English teachers are strange creatures; most of us like our jobs; we get excited every time we teach a play or a poem or a novel. We think that what we teach has some far-reaching effect on civilizing humankind. We think we have that power to save people. We don't, of course, but we think we can because in our classrooms, English teachers have small libraries that we invite children to use, and when one is destroyed, a whole history of learning is gone.

My classroom library had books from Dorothy White's eighth-grade English class at Holy Rosary Catholic School. She encouraged us to collect volumes for our personal libraries, so I did. Teachers from Immaculate Conception High School, like Rose Marie Barrasso, encouraged us to read and take notes on everything we could get our hands on, and I did. Instructors like Bill DeLoach at the University of Memphis invited us to borrow books from their office libraries, and I did. I used my notes from those classes for sixteen years at Hillcrest High, East High and Houston High. They were blown off the ledge too.

I named my child from a book on that classroom library shelf, Ariel, which was doubly wonderful from *The Tempest* and Sylvia Plath. Alice Walker autographed a book on that shelf. More than 2,000 students have touched, opened, read, interpreted, analyzed and dramatized pieces from those books. Many students, whose only book at home was the phone book, could just slide one out.

Millions of these collections exist all across the country. They can have five or eighty-five or hundreds of volumes. They are collections of what English teachers beg, borrow or steal. We buy many of them at bookstores, library sales and flea markets. We steal them from stacks of outdated and unwanted texts. We save them for years. They are our high school and college texts, written in, much to the horror of our parents, with notes that we are sure to need later. Our

parents would be much richer today if we had just sold back all those books. Our students and we would not.

Teachers from three Memphis City Schools, one Catholic school, the theater department at the University of Memphis and every English teacher at Houston High offered "anything you need." That said a great deal about the academic community here and their love and respect for paper: novels, plays, short stories, poems, even lesson plans and tests.

Many of my students called that week to say that I could borrow their saved notes from throughout the years and their books with scribbled notes in the margins. I was "not so happy, yet much happier." *Macbeth* was one of the first pieces I replaced when they built the new "mending wall."

I designed a floor-to-ceiling mural, a trompe l'oeil, of a stage for the new wall. Today when students stand in front of it, it seems like they are standing on the stage floor in front of the big red curtain and the Greek masks. They stand on the precipice, real and imagined, not the edge of a tragedy, but a vision of their futures in a denouement.

I moved over one hundred donated books to an inside wall closer to my desk and the door.

Before the Eulogy

My grandmother's death was not unexpected: Rosa Marie Caligaris Gallina was 91 years old. But six months before that day in September, she was walking around in the garden at our wedding reception, wondering when the band was going to arrive. If there had been music, she would have danced. She had friends and family; she was still driving. She had no disease; she took no medications. She rode in no wheelchair, used no walker, no crutches. No attendant helped her. She cooked and ate three meals a day. She cooked for us and planted flowers. She fussed at my mother when she didn't know where her children were. And then Hazel died. Her best friend. They lived across the street or down the street from each other for seventy years: when one family moved, the other family moved close by. Hazel's family wasn't even Italian. But when Hazel died, my grandmother decided to die too. And she did, on my birthday, which, my mother said, was a great honor because I had been her favorite grandchild. If I had had my druthers, I would have exchanged the dead determined one for the living thinking grandmother. I was pretty okay with the crying part since I was in shock for a while because that mortality thing gets hold of you pretty soon after the phone call. So to occupy my shock-time, I wrote the eulogy and decided that I could rise to the occasion, write it, and give it without falling apart. I possess my grandmother's resolve: living well is the best revenge. And I was pretty okay, after

my grandmother died, until they wanted to close the coffin lid over her face, and I lost it, sobbing into my husband's shoulder and holding my little girl's hand that was pretty wobbly all on its own, sobbing on out to and in the waiting black limousine that took us to the catholic church where we all grew up. The doors of the car opened, and we crossed the sidewalk onto the pavement in front of the vestibule doors where one of the deacons, who had known us all of our lives, rushed up to tell my husband and me that we could not receive communion during the funeral mass since we were divorced and remarried and not catholics any more. My husband, god love him, said, thanks, ken, we know the rules. And then I stopped crying. I decided that if I could just hate that man enough, the one who rushed up to us apostates destined for hell, without even a decent hello, how are you, or kiss my foot, spewing such hostless venom on such a sad sad day, if I could hate him enough, I could give that eulogy without missing a confessional beat, like remembering to finger the next glass bead on a lost rosary. And, god love me, I did.

Eulogy for My Grandmother

Rosa Marie Caligaris Gallina, the youngest daughter of an immigrant family, was proud to be born in Memphis while most of her ten brothers and sisters were born in Italy. She attended Normal Training School, where she ran track, and to Messick School, where she played basketball. She stopped going to school in the eighth grade to work on the family truck farm because they needed her in the fields. Like many other Italian families, they grew sweet potatoes, beans, tomatoes, and greens as produce for the local markets and grocery stores.

Her brothers eventually accompanied her on dates, and Rosa hated that because they would tease her about liking boys. She married my grandfather, Louis, in 1932, calling him Louie or Luigi when she wanted to tease him. They took the train to Hot Springs in Arkansas for their one night honeymoon, and she used to make fun of how short the trip was. She liked to travel all through her life and she could recall in vivid detail everything she did. Although she was up for any trip, especially with her family, she did not like it when anybody else went out of town for pleasure or business. She called us gypsies and cried to whoever would listen when we left, while we were gone, and when we returned. We didn't tell her until the very last minute so she wouldn't have time to have one of her famous reactions: heart palpitations, full-body rashes, stomach cancer, and brain tumors.

My grandmother had two daughters, my mother, Dorothy and my aunt, Martha, and she loved them both very much, but couldn't get over how their births had changed her life so completely. So instead of coddling and encouraging them, she resented them, challenging at every turn of their lives. They grew up to be the strongest and best women that I know. So while my grandmother's methods were not saintly by any means, the outcomes were miraculous. The people in our family are resolute. Some people who know us better would call us hardheaded mules: hardhead and mule are two of the first words I learned in Italian, *teste dure* and *assou*. I don't remember the time when I didn't know those words, hear those words, or say those words. But I also learned the words, *bella facia*, beautiful face. The grandchildren heard these words all the time. Do you know how it feels to grow up in a family when someone calls you beautiful and smart every day? You grow up thinking that you can do anything.

Of course in the same conversation my grandmother could also make you rethink a decision seventeen times, one that you made twenty minutes ago or twenty years ago. She believed that her job also included telling you if you needed your hair cut, if your dress was ugly or your boyfriend was too short or too bald or too poor, if your face was broken out, if you were too fat or too skinny. She did not hold her tongue. She could be as determined with prolonged

silences. People used to say she had the memory of an elephant. My sister, Teri, inherited that gift from her.

She loved babies, but she didn't want them around too much of the time. If you didn't have a baby, then she would ask when you were going to have one. She warned you never to get as drunk as Cooter Brown or act like a hussy. Rosa would amaze doctors about what she knew about pneumonia. Everything my family ventured caused this disease: wet hair in public, having no slip or undershirt on, living in Colorado, swimming, walking the dog, playing in the sprinkler, wearing no hat, and keeping our houses too cold.

But when she was happy, she was radiant, and these are the memories that the grandchildren all remember. She loved her four grandchildren, Brian, Ashley, Teri, and me without condition. She didn't understand any decisions we ever made, but she loved talking about us to other people on the phone, at church, at the beauty shop, at Peter Pan Cleaners, at Dominic's grocery and restaurant on Park Ave, and especially to our mothers. She grilled them about us everyday and could not believe that her two daughters knew so little about all the interesting details of their children's lives.

My grandmother loved to hear stories about our pets. She used to tell people that when she died she wanted to come back as one of our dogs or cats because we treated animals better

than the people we knew. She loved it when our dachshund, Greta, would run away from our house and run to her house on the next street. She loved Ralph, my aunt and uncle's dog who bit everyone else but her.

But she didn't like snakes. Just knowing they existed was her greatest fear. She didn't even want to be teased about them. She would ask for months after a snake spotting or a snake killing to make sure that the snake died an anxious and terrible death.

She also feared water, and, to keep us safe, she made all of us afraid too. So when we all learned to swim, she couldn't figure how our mothers accomplished that feat without her prior knowledge and permission. When my aunt and uncle bought a sailboat and my parents built a swimming pool in their backyard, she thought they had lost their minds. Rosa liked the cruise she took which was on the water and not in it. She liked sitting beside my parents' pool, watching Jacob and Neely swim under the water. She called them little fish. She put her feet in the Gulf of Mexico one time.

My grandmother would say, "Well, that's pretty good,'' when she was too surprised to criticize or argue. She didn't like getting presents, saying that we should save our money because "I don't need a durn thang." She thought getting bouquets of flowers, although romantic, was a waste of money because they died too soon. When she got surprised about some

child or dog story, she would say, “oooooh.” When it was a little more serious, she would say, “You gotta be kidding me.” When it was a lot more serious, she said words I can't repeat in front of my mother.

She didn’t think she was old. She told a nurse at the hospital that she was 70 and my mother was 82. The nurse wrote it down that way. People in their 70’s and 80’s were old people, but not her. She attributed her youthful looks to her natural brown hair and Dove’s soap and Pond’s Cold Cream. She would have said that she looked wonderful in the casket at the funeral home.

The few items that my grandmother enjoyed made up a short list: flowerbeds, people, food. . She grew beautiful roses, and she loved backyards especially my sister's rose garden. She loved to have company. She took naps on the living room floor when people visited. She loved to dance and would dance with any man who asked her. She complained about her feet hurting the next day, but to watch her dance the night before, especially at a wedding, was a delight for all of us. Rosa believed that all decent weddings included dancing. She was incredulous when people, especially family, chose not to have a band play at a wedding reception. It was a poor decision in her mind, unless those people were Protestants, and then, she guessed, they couldn't help it.

Rosa loved Dean Martin and Liberace and Elvis because they loved their mamas, they could sing, and they had beautiful hair. She loved President Kennedy and took us in her big white Dodge in 1960 to see him whiz by on the campaign trail, speeding past the donut shop that never stopped making donuts that day. She loved Robert Taylor, the movie star from the 1940's. She used to say that he could put his shoes under her bed any time. That was as graphic of a talk about love that we ever got from her.

She cooked butter bean soup, raviolas, and cookies that she mixed with her hands. I inherited her beautifully talented hands; mine look just like hers: crooked, scarred, knobby, and spotted from cooking for hundreds of people over the years. She liked to cook for twenty people, but never one person. She ate meat two or three times a day, seven days a week. She made the best salad dressing in the world. She liked to eat cold watermelon, figs, hamburgers, my father's barbequed chicken and my husband's spaghetti. At the grocery store or the peach orchard, she picked hard peaches for me and soft peaches for Teri. She taught us to love fried chicken gizzards, the rind from Parmesan cheese, fried chicken with butter under the skin, and ambrosia. She didn't wear perfume, but she and her house always smelled so wonderful, redolent of garlic, basil, vegetable soup, and dark brown spaghetti gravy. She loved to make my sister chi-chi bean soup for her birthday. My grandmother loved keeping her recipes secret. She gave pieces of the

same recipe to Brian and me, but Brian was the only grandchild who could taste-test the raviolas for Christmas. She loved giving us Coca Cola when our mothers said no. She always had gum or candy that didn't stick to her dentures.

My grandmother taught me to read Italian by sounding out all of the letters from the relatives who remained in Italy. The first 45 record I received was a gift from her, "Build Me Up Buttercup" from Woolco Department Store. At first she said I could just listen to the song on the radio, that it was a waste of money. I told her that's what my mother said. Then she bought it for me right away. She loved every car she ever drove and knew only one speed, very fast. We all inherited that pedal-to-the-floor method from her.

When she took us out to dinner, she whispered that we could order anything we wanted, that it was her treat, and we better not argue when the bill came. Her favorite drink was water with no ice, and her skin was beautiful because of it. She loved to go out to eat at Piccadilli's and watch Wheel of Fortune on Friday nights with my cousin Ashley. She loved to work Word Find Puzzles. She got tickled when my Uncle Jim would painstakingly rake the leaves in her yard, and Ashley and Brian would jump in the piles. She thought that it was wonderful when Brian built the gazebo at Lichterman Park and when Jim carried the torch for the Olympics. She loved to play cards. She loved slot machines. She loved her clock that would chime in the

living room every fifteen minutes. Ashley and Brian would run in there to listen to it when they were little.

Rosa was glad that Brian found Suzie and married her, but once she told me that Brian was smart enough to earn a doctorate, but he didn't know much about babies. She would be surprised that he and Suzie have three children. She loved to hear Ariel sing. She loved to see Jamie on the altar serving Sunday mass. She loved it when I married Cayce and thought all five of his boys were handsome like him. When she worked as a waitress at Dominic's, she loved to serve my sister and Vance Gayden after school, pretending that they were real customers. She worked at Peter Pan Cleaners until she was 81. Even though she did not finish high school, she bought a house and paid it off. She started a career at 56 when my grandfather died in 1966.

She entertained several boyfriends late in her life, and they courted her with a fierceness championed by many younger men, but she always said she was not interested in them and that they needed to stop acting foolish. If they could take her dancing, then that was their place in her heart. She loved my grandfather, and she told me that she was going to meet him in heaven two weeks before she died. She was a widow for 35 years, and she missed him every day.

My grandmother found solace in prayer, but if you listened to her when you spent the night, she prayed with great anxiety. I always thought that she was arguing with God. We all

prayed throughout my grandmother's life that she would find peace before she died. Although I believe that she is at peace now, I also want to believe that she was irritated with this world when she was born, that she knew that this life was just a stopping off point before heaven. What got her mad was her excellent health because it prolonged her wait for death. She criticized other people who had such good suffering and disease stories. She always whispered the word, *cancer*. She told my mother that she really didn't have breast cancer when my mother was diagnosed in her 40's and had two surgeries--a full and a partial mastectomy.

Many times we pick up the telephone to tell my grandmother about something amiss that happened to us or our crazy pets during the day. Our cars naturally turn at her street.

She would haunt us if we didn't miss her everyday. So we do.

What I Learned in Summer Camp

Two weeks after school let out in 2005, I drove to Lincoln: my first time in Nebraska and my first time living in a dorm by myself for eight days. Most people have similar overnight camp experiences when they can count many fewer birthdays than 50. But, missing my parents more than I thought possible since I had not lived with them for 28 years, I considered what kind of camp letter I would conjure at this later date in my life. I imagined what kinds of new things I would experience while working at, not archery not arts not crafts, but instead grading 625 AP World History essay exams with 625 strangers.

I bring wisdom home that my parents never have wished for me to possess. I imagine they believe this too. Their ironic mantra for me growing up was: try new things. My parents were always surprised when I took them up on their sincere prompt, as if putting the challenge out there would dissuade me from pursuing the obtuse, the extreme, the unconventional. They still are. And they learned not to ask too many questions. They were too busy being grateful that I had returned, landing safely. Wisdom was not a commodity to be treasured until I returned. The possibility, of danger from criminals, kidnappers, spies, and chefs who might poison me, always outweighed the wealth of the experience while it was happening. To my

parents, the process of examination does not exist, only the final results. So here is the letter I might have sent if I got up the nerve:

Dear Mother and Daddy,

Since you never let me go to camp when I was little, you never received any pretty scented stationery. Sorry if the messages might be a little skewed here in Nebraska. The paper is unperfumed as well. Anyway, after too much editing, something I would have definitely not done as a child-camper, I offer you a pretty honest list of stuff I learned at camp:

1. If you sneak your husband up to the eleventh floor of the dorm at the University of Nebraska, you will get some glaring, judgmental stares from some unhappy women. I kind of thought that wouldn't be a big deal, but man, was it. The men were housed on the 9th floor. When the elevator doors opened on their floor, a sign in the foyer read, "What happens on floor 9, stays on floor 9."

Why isn't that sign on the 11th floor? Did the 11th floor magically transform to an alternate Stepford universe? I think that's really unfair. Perhaps you have heard me utter that phrase throughout several decades in my life. Please continue to shake your head at my headshaking about the world. I know that you would prefer I didn't notice the uneven attention to the world of inequalities, where and when some of us carry around a vagina, inviting pain and inspiration.

2. If the university has hired a seminarian to be your van driver, you, as a recovering Catholic, should not start any conversations about A) your husband, the ex-seminarian, whom you entertained in your room on the eleventh floor, and B) your criticisms about withholding birth control from poor people, and C) the need for and the possibility of women priests.

3. If a stranger, and I mean a real stranger, picks up the book you are reading, WHILE you are reading it as you are eating dinner by yourself in the university cafeteria, and you don't choke on your yellow/white/brown food mid-chew about the obvious intrusion, you have every right to tell her about how fabulous David Sedaris' essays are and about his crazy family in New York. Mother and Daddy, he might be an author you never read. That's too bad. I was enjoying it, laughing out loud. This woman, the intrusive one that plucked my reading material, read a few lines and slammed the book back down on the table as if it were a serpent. Did she understand that obscenity can be funny? I bet you would call his writing--trashy. You thought The Doors' *Light My Fire* was trashy when I was in seventh grade. He's a little worse. I think David Sedaris listened to The Doors too.

The whole experience was like the time I was expecting one of your grandchildren. Total strangers patted my pregnant belly twenty-one years ago in the grocery store. I told them I was

carrying the spawn of Satan so they would leave me alone. No, Mother, I didn't do that. Your granddaughter is just fine. Of course we had to get that little tail removed.

4. When they have Civil War reenactments up here in Nebraska, the North wins unlike some of the reenactments in the South. I have no idea why men dressed in blue and dressed in gray recreate these battles and pretend to kill and die. At the Battle of Shiloh, we lost 68,000 men all together in two days What happens to a nation when 4,000 or 58,000 or 400,000 men are killed? What unimaginable possibilities are lost for all time? Sorry, I digress. I know you do not like to think of hard questions and answers.

Everyone seems to enjoy watching the battles here in Lincoln. Some people even bring picnic baskets filled with Nebraskan cuisine: wholesome and filling food in all the ranges of yellow, white, and brown.

5. The University of Nebraska's Cafeteria Service calls some stringy brown stuff up here barbecue. They put it on the salad bar--cold. They brag about how good the sauce is. Even the vegetarian Pakistani students were shaking their heads at it. We were also confused about the 3-carn casserole: cream carn, carn on the cob, and carn bread. They had no idea it was really corn pudding without the lightness of whipped eggs, whole cream, a little cayenne pepper, and some awareness of the heritage of the cook.

In the South, you can taste the love in the food; you can taste it in the stories before the dishes even get to the table. We have always had good stories at our table, and I do not think it extreme when we ask strangers to sit at the table for three or four hours after dinner to listen to them. It is essential for digestion as well as for comfort. In Nebraska, the women pile on great mounds of food, but what you taste is the efficiency. Efficiency is not a gift. And yet, the homemade hazelnut ice cream at Ivana Cone off campus was a culinary wonder. In addition, Corona beer should always be served really cold and with a lime. Nebraska needs to import ice and small green tropical fruit.

6. You remember when I used to watch Sesame Street? Okay, yes, I was in college at the time. I loved the puppet that hid behind buildings and street posts, trying to sell vowels from inside his overcoat. Although that sounds icky today, that's how I felt every time I brought a Diet Coke to breakfast. Red-eyed, trembling women came up to me, crying in hoarse whispers, "Where did you get that?" I gave the silver cans away like a drug dealer who gives out free samples of cocaine, knowing the supply will soon be cut off and the price hiked up to the rafters. I only had so many to share with the women on Floor 11, and then they were all mine. The people in Lincoln love them some Pepsi products. Iced tea is an alien concept; sweet tea, an aberration.

7. You can make friends in Lincoln in many ways other than giving out Diet Cokes. My favorite way was to tell them my hometown list: I am from Memphis, I've been to Graceland, I went to Priscilla's high school, I have Elvis' autograph on a dollar bill, I've seen him in concert, and I've had a close encounter. I do not tell them, Mother, you had to drag me to a concert in the 1970's. He was sweating in a white jumpsuit, for God's sake. He had forgotten the words to most of the songs, but you knew them and sang loudly with him, trying to make him remember the words to his own damn songs from way up in the balcony.

I do tell them the story about Elvis riding his motorcycle down our street when I was three years old, out riding my tricycle with long golden curls like Shirley Temple. He stopped to talk to me, and, I believe to this very day, to make me the next child movie star phenomena, but you thought he was some thug and shook your broom at him. He waved at you and then rode off with my movie career stuffed in his back leather pocket. Then the police, bodyguards, and all kinds of cars and news vans sped down our street, looking for Elvis. People love that story, Mother. Even Yankees. Even the woman from Bolivia who didn't speak English.

8. Even though I have never learned to do laundry, I had to have some clean clothes. I thought of it like an adventure, a quest down to the dark recesses of the basement of a Nebraska dorm with a garbage bag full of clothes and a plastic card and some detergent. So far so good. But, if

you think that what you are wearing also needs to be washed, and you have a cute camisole on under it, and if you proceed to take off your shirt in order to put it in the washing machine, men will appear from all areas of the basement to offer you baskets and dryer sheets, things that you have forgotten and really need. People are very friendly in Nebraska no matter where they're from. Daddy, I know this makes you proud about all those checks you wrote for my education. Hey, the laundry got done. What happens in the basement, stays in the basement.

9. Students who write sad and weird things on test papers for strangers to read are in trouble in some big way. As we sat in the fairground tents, or the Mongol yurts as we like to pretend, next to the racetrack, we had to consider the twisted humor of the anomalies. You both taught school. What does it say about our world when students write:

> This room has no windows and I feel like I'm in jail.
>
> Jesus was crucified about 1 BC.
>
> Gandhi was well-preserved because he made his own salt.
>
> It doesn't matter how loyal you think your subjects are if you are an emperor. One of them will always go all rat on you and betray you. I know this from personal experience.

and my personal favorite,

> The emperor was a sock puppet of the Pope.

I didn't include the truly obscene ones or the song lyrics or the ones that described being beaten at home or by a boyfriend or the drug use. Too many of those there were to be sure, and they are too tragic for mail sent from far away. They are too cruel anywhere.

And finally,

10. Smart women who ask too many questions are not nerds or anarchists even though we might start off that way in middle school. That idea is true for women in Lincoln, Lexington, Las Vegas, Little Rock, Lagos, London, or Lima.

When you're a little blue woman in a big red family, it really prepares you to be a little blue woman in a big red state. Thanks for providing so many dilemmas that I've had to ponder over the years. I hope I've made you proud when I jump over them in Memphis, and no matter where I am in Nebraska, even in my Hello Kitty shower shoes, even in the basement. We'll talk about all these funny things! Just wait until I get back.

Love,
The cute daughter

I have thought about that phrase--just wait until I get back-- just a few thousand times in my life. In Nebraska, I discovered its power: it is not a threat; it is an invitation to those who want to listen. And yet, it is a buffer for my family: by the time I get back home, I have to learn what details to leave in on paper and what to leave out in conversation--so as not to scare them.

There might have been some things that my family would have preferred that I did not learn. Too bad—the horses are already out of those Nebraska and Tennessee barns.

This scorn for innocence is something I have predicted in my own daughter's behavior--away in Knoxville on the fourth floor of Laurel Hall. I say to her in my effusive voice: We'll talk about so many things when you get back! She agrees, "Sure, Mom! (Just not all of them)."

Human Voices Wake Us

I never seek out famous people or read about them aloud from magazines in grocery stores, bashing them, tisking. I list that as one of my few positive traits. But, I can recall meeting three famous people who, even today, make me giddy, people whose voices reveal to me the common and connected experiences of all things.

Summer 1958. I was 3, riding my tricycle on a sidewalk in East Memphis, looking for adventure. Elvis rode up on his motorcycle and stopped to chat. I wanted to sing to him, "You Are My Sunshine." My mother, who, at 78, is still horrified at her reaction, shook her broom at him, thinking he was some leather-clad hooligan. He smiled and waved at her and then me and sped on to his glory and his doom. Elvis didn't know many mermaids, it seems to me. No one sang to him.

I met the British actor, John Hurt in 2004. I was sitting with my husband at breakfast on the Richelieu Hotel patio in New Orleans, after the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets the year before Katrina. I was eating my scrambled eggs, when, at the table next to us, this gravelly, oh-so-charming voice from England drifted towards our table. I whispered to my husband about who this gifted man was. I use him as an example of people who act even when

they're not talking. My husband leaned over and said, "Aren't you glad we're not barbarians who bother famous people and interrupt their meals?" "Hrumph," I said.

Three days later, my husband looked out of our hotel window at the patio and stated, "If you want to go talk to your boy, he's down there, eating breakfast." I ran for the door. "You might want to get dressed first." Good thinking.

A few minutes later, I walked right up to him and shot out my hand. He took it. I about fainted, hoping I didn't slobber and stutter at the same time. I told him I teach his film, *The Elephant Man*, to twelfth-graders in my AP English Literature class. I told him that I was so thrilled to meet the man who had had such a great theatrical career that included roles that stretch from Caligula in *I, Claudius* to Mr. Olivander in the *Harry Potter* series. He told me he was working on a new pirate film in New Orleans, *The Skeleton Key*. I asked him if it was scary, and he replied with a wry smile, "It won't make much money if it's not, will it?" Five crisp British short-i sounds in a row. Oh my. English teachers have high standards for sexual aura, and they include diction and accent.

He was so gracious and we chatted for a while, but I looked down at his cold scrambled eggs and the beautiful woman on his left. He even waved goodbye with an accent. And we both

eat scrambled eggs. Sigh. I've always been attracted to pirates who can also read Prufrock. I don't know that he does; I just know that he can.

In the summer of 2005, I met the third famous person, Margaret Edson. I was at an AP World History conference in Atlanta, and I knew no one else in the entire state so I picked up a local newspaper to see if I could improve my solitary nightlife. Amazingly she was scheduled to speak that same evening in Decatur. I had no idea where Decatur was. How far away could it be? I knew that if I got to the ocean, then I was lost, but, hey, then I would be at the ocean. I couldn't lose. I really didn't need to be anywhere until eight o'clock the next morning so I drove to the library, which ended up being very close, about twenty minutes from my hotel in downtown Atlanta. I ate a lovely dinner at Cafe Lily on Ponce de Leon all alone without a book.

I sat with 150 other people at the library who came to listen to Ms Edson. We watched this amusing and poignant Pulitzer-prize winning playwright speak brilliantly, yet with such a simple clear voice, about writing and reading, using no notes, just her spirit. She taught a kindergarten class at the time and their job was to love words. That's all. And yet reading and writing built everything because everything is built on reading and writing. Oh, the applause.

She asked for questions from the audience. I shot up my hand. I told her I teach her play, *W;t*, every year and that some of my students use it as their choice for Question #3 on the

AP test and make the highest score. The audience applauded again, she blushed, and I gushed, interrupting her loudly, "No," and stopped the applause of those 150 people. "You don't understand. They could have picked Shakespeare or Tolstoy or Dostoevsky or Austen or Atwood or Vonnegut, but, no, they picked you!" I let the wild applause explode. I thanked her on behalf of my students and their love of the voices in this play.

In line to get her autograph, I waited like a band groupie even though there were no T-shirts, preparing a face to meet the face. When I reached her, she grabbed my program that she signed for a really long time. I urgently wanted to tell her not to get her signature too close to the margins because I was going to frame it for my classroom. Instead, we talked about academic freedom, and she asked me how I was able to teach her play. I told her I teach it in a unit on monsters in society, with *Grendel* and *Frankenstein* and *The Elephant Man*. I did not tell her that John Hurt and I were buds. What she wrote on the program was her home email address. I lost all the spit in my mouth. She told me to write her and have my students write down their questions about the play, and she would send a tape of the answers.

Margaret Edson teaches in an inner-city Atlanta public school. I knew she was busy so I waited a whole two weeks before I wrote her. We sent several email messages back and forth during the fall. She signed her email, "your friend, Maggie." I chortled about it in class. My

students thought that I had lost my mind. They could not believe I was this animated and thrilled to the core over someone who could not shoot a free throw or catch a ball or sing in a band.

That fall, my new group of students read *W;t* aloud in class, a play about the English professor who has cancer. (I love irony.) They saw the play in West Memphis, Arkansas, produced in the Crittenden County Hospital, and viewed the HBO film version with Emma Thompson that won the Emmy for best dramatic film and best director. My students wrote her over 300 questions, but before I sent them, my friend, Maggie, asked me to name a student committee to see if they could cut them down to ten. They got it down to 14. I sent her the questions on a soft October night, and then I didn't hear from her.

In the meantime, it's a mean time. I was diagnosed with breast cancer in the fall of 2005. I didn't want to write her about it because the serendipity was just a little too macabre, but I finally did in late November after the first surgery.

No response. She was busy! If my cancer was not in my lesson plans, I know it wasn't in hers either. I still had so much to teach like *Hamlet* and *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Madame Bovary* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* and 300,000 poems that my students swear are all about death. What about Raskolnikov? What about Offred? What about Ophelia who drowns because she

goes swimming with heavy clothes in winter? What voices was she listening to? What about Prufrock? What about Emma? What about Billy Pilgrim? What intense and pertinent voices were missing in their lives?

Oh.

Maybe I do teach a great deal about irony and death. I know the voices dying with a dying fall. I know how to make my students chant Eliot's name even in public to ward off death of the soul. When my students discover these works might not all be about death, they might learn that they really are about the living part before the dying part.

I'm still wondering about that myself.

Winter break ended with no news from Maggie. But when I returned to school, there stuffed in my mailbox was a package covered with lots of pretty foreign stamps. It was from England, the home of John Hurt and T. S. Eliot. It was not from John or Tom. In it, Maggie Edson had sent a postcard from Canterbury Cathedral (nice touch) with a written message about how sorry she was about the cancer. She had worked in a cancer ward for two years while getting her degrees in English and history, and she based her play, *W;t*, on these experiences. She quoted from her own play on the postcard, "Keep pushing those fluids." Oh my. I carry the postcard in my schoolbag everyday.

She also sent a cassette tape, answering my students' questions. Her mother played the part of my students, and my friend, Maggie answered the questions off the top of her head for a solid hour. I realized that she had taped this on winter break, on vacation after tea and cakes and ices. I listened to the tape at home first, alone. You can barely hear their voices over the mighty British breeze. I learned more about thinking and writing and living in those sixty minutes than I have learned in a long time. It was touching, enthralling, so human, such a gift. I only cried a little. You would have thought she had sent pieces of the Holy Grail. We have the only tape like it in existence.

I emailed her a quick thank you, but told her a proper note on nice paper would arrive soon. She emailed for me to keep in touch about the cancer because she was "interested in my progress." After the second surgery, I sent her *Count on Us; A Tennessee Number Book* for her kindergarten class, a CD of Memphis Makeshift Music from some of my students' bands, a large magnet with Elvis on his motorcycle, note cards whose proceeds support Theatre Memphis, and one of my student's still life paintings.

Maggie and I met again in January at a restaurant in Chattanooga after a school year had ended and another one had taken its place. We sat with her partner, Linda, and talked about students who suffer from poverty of spirit as well as poverty of resources and the questions

about life after cancer and writing when your bones ache and your hair hurts and her play and my plays and how much milk little boys drink. We talked for close to three hours about nothing and everything, as good friends do.

My students asked me if Margaret Edson knew that Memphis was almost six hours away from Chattanooga. I told them if she had asked me to have lunch with her and to drop by Seattle, I would have just said, sure. She said that the next time we would meet in Nashville. There was going to be a next time. And even if there were no promise of another time, that lunch would have gone down as one of my most important life events.

But, in fact, she visited me in Memphis in 2009 when we both attended a hospice conference on Healing and the Arts for Methodist Hospitals. She walked in late while I was reading one of my responses to the group. No pressure. That night after the benefit, a woman asked her if she was a Christian since she included a nude scene in her play. The woman who asked the question sat right behind me. I was sitting on the end of a row with fifteen of my students. Like a well-oiled machine, they, in unison, predicting the apocalypse, leaned forward, to gauge my reaction to this woman's question. While Maggie fielded the short pop like Derek Jeter, I turned around to scowl at her with The Face. My students cry and run from that face. That night it stopped that moronic woman's follow-up question. I also raised my hand to keep it

from happening too. And then my friend, Maggie, said, Yes, Natalie, thanks, and your question?" It was a question about the voices of redemption in her play.

When the Q & A ended, she invited me to a cocktail party with her host family, and I said that I wasn't invited, and she said, "I need you there." So I went to hang out with my friend, Maggie, who asked in front of a dozen people, "Now, Natalie, tell us about your new play." I think I had a piece of cheese in my mouth. I think I drank another glass of wine. My voice went missing. I think I fumbled and mused through somehow, not expecting the questioner or the question.

After I picked her up to take her to the airport the next morning, we had the opportunity to have breakfast together, just us two. We talked about her move to fifth grade social studies and sons who grow out of their shoes in a month. We talked for about an hour before I drove her to catch her plane. We send emails to each other to this day.

Sometimes when we meet a great voice, famous or not, we try to keep them in our heads. Their gifts are not mired in their fame but instead in the quiet inspiration they exude, something they probably have no idea about and no control over. The lines of fame we cross to talk to them may be short and invisible to them, but to everyone else they seem insurmountable.

In truth, to the lucky few, we see they are indelible with awareness and grace. They listen and we talk back; they sing to us and we listen. Sudden blows numb us; human voices wake us.

Some Talk of You and Me

My friends laugh at me, and I need someone to talk to. They find it amusing that I have 1,237 people designated as "Friends" on my Facebook account. They have no idea why and how and how long I have accumulated such a motley crue of names, genders, ages, religions, political persuasions, professions, philosophies and attitudes. Oh, do not ask. I also have no idea.

Five of the people on the list I have known since kindergarten. One is my radiologist. One is my husband. One makes ice cream; another, beds. No hog butchers, no stackers of wheat, a few painted women, some women of color. Some are sorority sisters. Some attend the Unitarian church; most don't. Many are secretaries, teachers, librarians, and nurses. Some are parents of children who went to school with my daughter since kindergarten.

Ah--separate directions--the strength of the list. Some are book club members. Some are really great guys who should be invited to the book club. Some are artists and musicians. No beggars or thieves, but instead, aunt and cousins and daughters-in-law. Some ride horses; others, wheelchairs. Some read about Jesus; some, beach trash. Some see movies like *Hotel Rwanda*, and some people need a map to find Africa. Some people watch Tigers and Grizzlies, while others don't even like the zoo. Most of them are former students, their names accepted sometimes hours after they graduate. Some are fellow writers; some, my former teachers. No,

that's not true. Everyone on that list has taught me something important, and everyone on the list--everyone--knows someone who has survived breast cancer and someone who has died from this terrible disease.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer in October of 2004, it came as a real shocker, considering that it was a routine mammogram with no symptoms. Actually it still is a shocker, and I have to tell you, as well as 1,237 others on a regular basis, that it helps to have a myriad number of opinions when confronted with myriad possibilities. I am fine. I am. I tell everyone who wants to listen; there is a special connection within intangibly saved text,

How are you feeling today?

You are going to breeze through radiation!

Don't forget the aloe vera!

You are in my thoughts and prayers.

Hang tough after this surgery!

These silent, yet voiced Facebook messages are an ocean of knowledge, experience and wisdom, essential for my physical health, mental health, and peace of mind, and maybe even theirs.

I would rather share their love and support in person, but our lives are so fractured with thinking about children, aging parents, jobs, traveling, health issues, pets, and the fantasy relocations of ex-spouses that we see one another when we can, but we rely on Facebook for that grab-and-go reach over magical screens to make sure someone knows we care about something, anything. I get requests for prayers and invitations to parties. I hear from friends who are having their first baby or ninth biopsy. They share news about parents who fall from demetia and grandchildren who falter with asthma. I get email from Hawaii, Italy, New York, France, Washington, Arizona, Texas and South Carolina and Illinois and Minnesota and Louisiana and Georgia and North Carolina and Florida and Tennessee and Mississippi. I send and receive the most from Memphis, my hometown.

My former students write Facebook messages, looking out of their dorm windows at skyscrapers and beaches and mountains. Their only complaints are about roommates who smoke too much, their desires to change majors, and the text messaging addiction that calls to them more than their reading assignments. I am sad to read about their inevitable tragedies laid out for the world to see: betrayal, loneliness, racism, alcohol consumption, boredom. I love to read their sporadic discoveries about leaving the suburbs, love, and compassion. It inspires me to listen, to be glad to remember that young people share chaos too. I remember when life-

threatening issues existed in a galaxy far, far away, limited to aliens over 30 years old whose hair was growing thinner and grayer as mine is now.

I need the intense Facebook updates as much as the sweet. I received one smack-in-your face Facebook voice right before a surgery that stated, "Cut both of those suckers off and buy some cute clothes." I don't have cute clothes either?

My friendly neighborhood radiologist said to start reading everything on the internet. She advised me to ask people about their experiences. It does not matter how much stuff you look up. It's what you do with it. All teachers and doctors and miscreants on the planet believe this. Even the eternal Footman believes it.

Many women in their 40's, 50's, and 60's, bright and beautiful women, still have not gone to get their first mammogram or will not go for follow-up appointments because of an ominous postcard or phone call. They will wear ribbons, buy the stamps, and write the checks for runners who save others, but they will not run to the mammogram store to save themselves.

I think we all can do it all: share information, buy stamps, race for the cure, take preventative measures (making appointments and keeping them), and make good decisions about our care. Forty thousand people die every year from breast cancer. Thirty percent of them

could be saved with early detection and follow-up care. That's 14,000 more people I could be Facebooking about a hundred indecisions and for a hundred visions and revisions.

A director once told a story about producing a children's play in which he has only two different costumes that the children can pick from. He puts the sailors on one side of the room and the pirates on the other. A small girl walks up and wants to tell him something. He is busy, shouting commands and pointing the children in the right directions. She tugs at his shirt. In a huff, he looks down and demands, "Are you a sailor or a pirate?" The girl calmly explains that she is a mermaid and asks where she should stand. "There ARE no mermaids, only sailors and pirates." "Oh, but you're wrong," she said. "I AM a mermaid. Where do I stand?" No amount of convincing was going to make her change her mind, and the director finally stops asking her to stand in other places. He says, "Stand by me. All mermaids stand here by me." And she does.

My Facebook list of "friends" is a group of special people very much out of the ordinary, and sometimes out of place. They have never been or will ever be good pirates or good sailors. They disturb the universe by dropping overwhelming questions on the plates of authority, spitting out all the butt-ends of the complacent. They do not stand on the isolated, disinterested, and predictable islands of denial and delusion, like those oh-so-smug-arm-chair

sirens that never make sudden leaps into deep and muddy waters. My Facebook friends jump in cold waters, giving their advice like aquatic guides, swimming over wireless tides of good will about all the topics of the universe, adding no derision or judgment, but no scuttling across the floors of silent seas either.

My body is looking less and less like a mermaid's. If school teaching doesn't work out, I'm pretty sure topless dancing is out. I look like I've been fighting those pirates. I wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled because I am short and my radiation oncologist thought I had great socks. Can people swim when they're going through radiation? I need to Facebook somebody about that so I can share that information when it is my turn. Indeed there will be time. I am one of the lucky.

I have also seen the heads of my friends going through chemo grow slightly, then completely bald. Even when their computer screens go dark, their greatness does not flicker.

Play Something

My daughter was proud of her new T-shirt. She waited until we were at school where she attended and I work before she let me see it. She covered it up with a sensible sweater at the time, but I am sure once we parted company, me to the English/History hall and her, to the Chorus hall, all bets were off. Her shirt read, and I have to keep myself from spewing while typing this, "Too pretty to do math."

While all my friends know that I have offended the machine gods horribly and often, I pay distant homage to the math gods. They are strong. They are powerful. They let people become almost important if they are fussed and chanted over, carried on about. They even let some mortals add symbols to them like dollar signs, sigma's, and cosines.

I hate math and I always have. I would rather have taken a beating than do word problems. That stupid train to Baltimore, full of marbles, rushing at 75 miles per hour to some god-forgotten place in Ohio, where usually stood a bathtub full of water, needing to be drained at 4 ounces per day until empty, haunted me for years. Long division was a torture that even a president would not allow; geometry was the bane of my existence. I can keep away the undead with protractors and compasses.

In Catholic schools when we were weak in math, we received fifty more problems a night to improve our test scores. It was sold to us as a penitent gift, but I was not grateful, not even a little. My parents got a tutor for me. It was humiliating. We don't speak of it. I ran for Miss Understood of the Math World. Geometry, I secretly believed, was easy for people who could not read as well as I could. It was for carpenters and architects and women who stayed home and crocheted doilies. I have never used a ruler that measured an area the same the same way twice. Ever.

I saw math being used when I had radiation treatments for breast cancer in 2006 where machines shot great streaks of red light and heat to markered parallel lines and acute angles of purple and green on pale places that don't usually need color unless it's to ink in a tattoo. Those radiologists and technicians were the high priestesses; those women knew about the magic powers of science and math.

Girls, throughout hisotry, have had few career choices: mother, virgin, whore, witch, not exactly positions associated with great perks or retirement plans. Men reluctantly gave women permission to perform breakout activities: vote, rule, have children or not, have sex for fun, walk out of a bad marriage, play soccer, be a doctor, volunteer, protest, travel alone, but most importantly, go to school to learn what boys learn: math.

When I was younger, I believed that boys learned math faster and easier because boys loved baseball. And girls who loved boys who loved baseball would learn math if they remembered four (count 'em!) rules: 1) stop thinking about the boy, 2) offer up math tutoring for the poor souls in purgatory (I personally have gotten thousands out), 3) memorize baseball statistics, and 4) learn to play something.

Boys take risks in math, in baseball, and in life. They can get dirty and sweaty and even tear their clothes without people yelling at them. All members of society realize that boys fall down. It is their nature, almost a sacrament, and the literal beginning of the initiation process. Their parents swat them on the bottom as infants, tell them not to cry and to get outside and play. Boys hear the ritual chant of exoneration when they begin to take their first steps: You're not hurt. Tough it out. Keep going.

Baseball gives boys chances. Time at the plate entails myriad possibilities with three strikes, countless fouls, and four balls. Heck, if you're a little clever, you can even walk to a base. In baseball, hitting .300 is pretty good. It's not a good average for an airline pilot, but baseball can be very, very good to you if you only hit the ball a third of the time. I don't know any woman who is thrilled with or paid for getting something done a third of the time. If

teachers had that success rate, we'd all be fired. Instead of No Child Left Behind, it would be No Teacher Left Standing.

My parents and all of my girlfriends' parents must have gone to the Easy Bake Oven School of knee kisses. Bactine and Neosporin and Mercurochrome and Band-Aids and Hawaiian Punch in our Gidget thermoses were our Shoe Black and our Gatorade. Our tears were not only expected; they were an industry. There would be no infection or scars. Scabs were a Glamour Don't. There was no falling-down practice, no sliding into fame and glory.

What do girls practice counting? Who counts us?

I loved a boy in eighth grade who sat across the aisle from me at Holy Rosary Elementary School. He had memorized everything about baseball since he was five: batting averages (a decimal with 3 places), ERA's charted over a series of years, reasons why Ozzie Smith could get into the Hall of Fame with a .250 batting average, the entire lineup of the 1970's Cincinnati Reds, why Brooks Robinson, number 5, (the same as his and Johnny Bench's) was the best third baseman ever, the year Lou Gehrig hit four home runs in one game . . . ad infinitum.

While I collected and traded holy cards and cards with flat dusty gum pressed up against the latest *Teen Magazine* idol, that boy and all of his friends collected and traded boxes and

boxes of baseball cards. And in the darkness (certainly against fire code laws) of the school halls on the way to the restroom, we girls leaned on the cool tiles, waiting our turn, squirming about Bobby Sherman and David Cassidy and Jim Morrison and Mr. Chekov while the boys, across the great divide that was our hall and our society, played baseball quiz show: What was Tom Seaver's number? What year did the Dodgers move to Los Angeles? What was Bob Gibson's ERA in 1968? What year did Don Larson pitch a perfect game in the World Series? It was like osmosis and transubstantiation all rolled into one. Calculating saves, wild pitches, errors, stolen bases, endorsements, salaries, those boys never even knew that they were learning the fundamentals of math and business. We girls, who rode menstrual pads as wide and as thick as skateboards, would give up Bobby and The Lizard King too soon, but those boys, those smelly, sweaty, playground-dirt-lovin' boys, never stopped acquiring, vying for champ of baseball knowledge.

Those boys with their severe crew cuts and uniform blue ties knew everything about baseball: stats, rules, flukes, exceptions. They learned about fairness and working as a team. They learned how to put in hours of practice after school, on Saturdays and in the summer. They practiced being smart and smart aleck. And in math class, they shot up their hands even when they knew they were wrong. It was that ability to fall down and brush themselves off and

do it again ten minutes later and the day after that and the year after that and the decades after that.

Ranking players and emulating a batting stance showed them who was great and how to be great. It was a big fat tutorial on cause and effect, word problems, memorization, and fame. And the biggest payback was that their fathers could come to watch them play and eat popcorn and a big hotdog with drippy yellow mustard and yell and curse at umpires. Those dads could scream encouragement to the tiniest of boy ballplayers whose growth spurts would arrive late in college after whispered prayers and mega doses of thyroid medications. Those fathers could scream with them about holy things called Cubs, and Yankees, and Cardinals.

What girl ever wants to be a Marlin? Do you think any girl's team in America is called the Giants? Please. How many of us holy-carded girls screamed with our fathers and their friends for anything back then? Can we count on the girls with the pompoms who can only count to eight? Most of us don't want to play with them because they just yell for boys who get to play ball.

Many girls learned to play three things that helped us to understand math: the piano and softball and soccer. I am willing to bet that over 90% of my excellent math/science girl students have played a musical instrument or a sport when they were little girls. They practiced being

smart like runners racing with weights. They've been counting on themselves for a long time

I married that boy nine years ago. He still loves baseball, and he teaches business and statistics at a local university. He brought along five sons who play ball. I am not the world's greatest stepmother, but I scored tons of points because I know how to play left-field ball. I played in my neighborhood in the street until I grew things that made it hard to swing the bat like before. We couldn't play with the boys at school because we couldn't "mix" at recess at Catholic schools. I remember yelling, "Bunt it" once when the guys were around. They kept asking me to repeat it. Because it took me awhile to catch on and because they heard "tit" in the middle of the phrase, I received unmerciful grief. I am pretty sure they wouldn't have let us play with them anyway, even that boy whose special team I play for at home.

I've been a catcher on a softball team in which I was considered the girliest girl out there. I have played and coached tennis, volleyball, and softball because my piano skills are more than lacking. My father came to watch me play until he saw me get mowed down at home plate. It was my fault. I didn't calculate the correct time it took for the ball to reach my glove as opposed to her cleats reaching and tearing up my calf muscle. I think that's a word problem involving algebra and physics and good sense.

I still remember lots of baseball stats because, well, I needed to impress that boy. To be perfectly honest, I learned just enough math to get through graduate school in liberal arts where we reserve numbers for feet of poetry and pages of tragedies and masterpieces in museums and seconds of film and measures in arias and soldiers in battles.

I also know how to keep score in a few of the games of life and how to whisper the lineup of the 1970's Cincinnati Reds in a man's ear when we get upstairs after we put all of our players to bed. His home-run stats are pretty impressive for an old-timer.

When girls don't revere the power of math and science, we pay the moron's premium in too many academic ways. I will relay that message to my daughter when I happen to lose her "too pretty to do math" T-shirt in the wash. Like Demeter and Persephone, we might be destined to follow each other into the nether world of math. I wish I could count on it being different.

Eulogy for Bill

A really good friend of mine, Bill Deloach, died in 2007. He was my mentor, head of my committee in graduate school, and one of my heroes.

We met in a fog of serendipity in 1978, when Bill happened to roll by in his wheelchair during my argument with the head of the English department about how he should add linguistics as a graduate degree. The man refused on the grounds it was a "creative tangent" of the study of literature. I went back to my office in tears. Studying Chaucer was not helping me teach anyone anything about language.

Bill DeLoach, quadriplegic since the age of 19, ex-seminarian, professor, husband to another professor in a wheelchair, came to visit me that same afternoon. He suggested that I stop crying and design my own graduate degree in Linguistics through the University College. He would help me, and he did. I graduated with an MA in Linguistics in 1980. He helped me to reconsider the universe every day until the day he died.

My good friend Sandra Hawkins sent me her condolences and to tell me that Bill was the first, if not only, teacher to tell her that she could not write. She went to his office to "discuss" the C- on her "most wonderful" story. She was not a 19-year old bimbo; she was a mature 31, married for eleven years with two sons. She had worked for a doctor, a radio station, and several

banks. She was determined and serious about her studies, no frat parties or drug sessions. And, she was paying the tuition, not her parents.

So, she was more than irritated that this college professor had the gall to downgrade her work in his office filled with shelves the height of his wheelchair. He held a red pen with rubber bands strapped to his crooked hand and bled red ink all over her creation while she watched. But he, kindly and quietly, led her to see that the story lacked conflict, character development, and sex or curse words. It was written by a happy and contented wife and mother: dull and uneventful. He had taught her a great lesson about creative writing, that she was no good at it, and that was perfectly fine. Even so, he was the best teacher of the most difficult of skills that she never mastered.

Bill taught several of my classes in the English department including Linguistics and the Greater Memphis Writing Project. He was an idea man, and he thought that students and teachers should be passionate about every idea they had the opportunity to explore. He was a teacher with a special gift of seeing the very best in everyone he met. He even said nice things about the assholes of this world because he really believed that they would somehow come to their senses and do the right thing. He often had expectations that those people could never reach. His wheelchair might have been low to the ground, but his passions were lofty. Those

naysayers could stand on the tips of their toes and never reach the heights of a man who could not even wiggle his toes.

Bill loved his wife, dessert buffets, William James, his dogs, reading and talking about reading instead of dwelling on unfair realities. Although he was the one in obvious physical constraints, he believed to his core that he could make you feel better, and he did that with a devious twinkle in his eye and a wry grin on his face, heralding an article or a book you should read right away. He probably would give you a copy if he had one tucked away in his crazy messy office.

He took up hang gliding whicj didn't go well, and he crashed and broke his leg, but he could not feel it so he was okay with it. Once he let me drive his van to Dallas because we were giving papers at the CCCC convention, and I had to sit in the extra wheelchair because that's how anyone not in a wheelchair reached the pedals of the van. I jumped out of the wheelchair in front of a gas station attendant in Arkansas and screamed, "It's a miracle". Bill thought that was funny. He laughed and clapped his wrists together, the thick rubber bands for holding forks and pens dangling.

He was a gentleman and a scholar, a listener and an advisor, a friend and an editor. The world is sadder because Bill Deloach was one of the few pure spirits to reach the common

people, willing to inspire us through trauma and politics in spite of his own struggles. He was a man of great faith and asked complex questions to amplify truth, never turning it into a harsh mandate or destructive gossip, but instead philosophy to contemplate and take action on.

While he lost his power to speak at the end of his life, Bill never lost his passionate voice or his demonstrative soul. He was the quintessence of integrity in the face of adversity, and we who knew and loved him will be paler and lighter in our search for meaning in a world that does not often honor voices of humility and bravery, faith and scholarship, tenacity and love.

Is anyone else coming by

perhaps the man asked into the phone in the milk-dudded hall of the theatre where I took refuge with the espn guys on tv after I left Julia and our husbands with the violence on screen number two, so graphic that I could not look up at some gangsta hurting a baby on an ironing board over a drug deal begun by hoodlums and justified by the police in the underbelly (wherever that is) of nyc since most people do not know what is going on but just cry when their brother gets shot or their baby is sent to foster hell or they put their cousin in the ground after he bleeds out from a bullet wound to the head for betraying a badge or a skewed dream in october when the color commentators of the world series ask people to stand up during the seventh-inning stretch when fans sing god bless america loudly and breathe beerily then sit down again to scream at blue for the number of outs, fouls, and strikes in crowded stadiums that have no other function on a Friday night than to fill up when little girls exit out of screen number three and beg to go to the pajama party after the movie but can't because most likely their dad is sober at this and only this point and not at another so he has to leave now to take them not straight, but home-toward and not later as he slips his snockered hands around the clammy wheel, depending on which cop you asked yesterday about the gin-tossed seconds of the blurry, yet tragic morning.

Comfort Food

"These matters seem as well worthy of study as the political and military troubles or the glories of nations."

--Richard Bennett and John Elton in *History of Corn Milling*

My grandmother thought it was a joke when, in the 1960's, in the United States, culinary schools and big-time restaurants discovered a special, and therefore more expensive, item called pasta to put on their menus. My family called it spaghetti, not just because we're Italian, but because that's what noodles on a plate generally become when they are mounded up in mahogany gravy, layered on top with pieces of roast that spread the rich color and flavor to whatever strands they touch. Pasta, the ultimate comfort food, makes us feel better about the search for meaning in our lives. The history of sharing and not sharing of grains, specifically wheat and corn, has taught us that the availability of food is the comfort that millions have sought but have not always found.

In 1174, in Alessandria, Italy, a peasant named Gagliaudo saved the town from invasion from the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa. He allowed himself to be captured by the enemy with his cow to which he had fed the last grain of the city. The German soldiers cut open the cow to cook it, but the cow's stomach was full of grain, and they asked him, "What is the reason to waste such a rich meal?" He lied to them, saying, "I was forced to feed my cow with

the grain because Alessandria has so much wheat. There is no place left to put it except inside cows."

The Emperor did not want a long siege with such a fortified city so he left the city free. The malaria scare was just incidental. A statue of Gagliaudo stands in one of the town's squares, but not one speck of statuary honors Frederick anywhere near there. To the victor and the other cows goes the grain. And to make pasta you need that grain.

The making of *pasta fresca* for immediate use in daily cooking is one thing; the utility, something else. The invention of macaroni or any dry pasta, has a nebulous history, but it has been attributed to the Etruscans, the Chinese, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, and, incorrectly, Marco Polo. Perhaps the original pasta maker is not so important as what effects pasta has made on civilizations: perennial famines could be controlled because dried pasta has a very long shelf life, governments could warehouse surplus for times of low yield, and a plentiful supply allowed longer sea voyages and thus more exploring.

One historian suggests that Sicilian Jews inherited the practice of making pasta from Arab/Norman Sicily, an odd triumvirate of culinary promise and compromise. A Genovese document dated in 1279 relates the story of a soldier named Ponzio Bastono, who owned a *barixella una plena de maccaronis*, a chest full of macaroni, and in the early fourteenth century,

Tuscan recipes described vermicelli cooked with the Arab additions of almond milk, sugar and saffron.

My grandmother's village is in the middle of the world. If you look at a map and put a dot at the median point of Turin, Milan, and Genoa, there lies the village of Bassignana in the province of Alessandria in Piemonte. It is my family's ancestral home and the center of the best cooking in the region. She would have been so proud of Gagliaudo's and Ponzio's forethought to save the grain and pack the dried pasta for good measure; to her, the liberties of the Tuscan/Arab recipe--*pazzo*–crazy!

In the 1370's, Marchione di Coppo Stephani wrote that corpses from the Black Death were layered in open pits like cheese in between lasagna noodles, a graphic and unappetizing metaphor for a relatively new dish. To balance the future of unending lasagna casseroles, Italian chefs created pastas of all shapes and sizes. To cover those noodles, grandmothers in every town of every Italian province created a litany of sauces that made the angels weep and changed cooking for the next 700 years. Catherine de Medici shared what those Italian women knew about pasta and sauce with those French guys who, pretty much, picked up the pasta dish and ran away with the sauce spoons.

By the early sixteenth century, *pasta secca* had become so common that it developed into a metaphor, though pejorative, for a literary style known as *ars macaronica*, the macaronic way—a mixing of the dialect from Mantua, Latin and Italian, describing something "gross, crude, and rustic like macaroni made with flour and water and mixed with cheese and butter." Macaroni and cheese, the ultimate comfort food, an inexpensive and easy dish to make for the masses. *Gourmet? Non. Mangia si bene? O, si!* Comforting? You bet.

Italians are smug about polenta, a stiff pad of stone-ground grits found under shrimp or andouille sausage at restaurants all over the world that serve a Creole Sunday brunch. Since the invention of the water mill by the Greeks and borrowed and improved upon by the Romans in the first few decades of the first century, peoples on the Italian peninsula have served polenta for hot breakfasts at home and when family is sick, especially children and the elderly. Polenta is a gift for people who live in a close or an extended family, trying to get well from illness, from the pains of childbirth to the boils of the Black Death.

Polenta is cooked cornmeal. Although historically Italians used red ceci (garbanzo) beans until maize came from America, the recipe remains the same. Women boiled the coarse cornmeal in salted water or stock in a round-bottom copper pot, a *paiolo,* and stirred it constantly with a long wooden spoon, a *tarello* for about forty minutes. *Nonnees* cool the

mixture, slice it in two-inch thick slabs, fry it in olive oil or butter until crispy, and serve with a slight dusting of grated Parmesan cheese and grated black pepper. It is also served on a flat wooden communal platter in a big hot mound where each family member, sitting in a circle, scrapes the board, each one consuming bite after bite, moving toward the center where in good times there might be piled meat and gravy. In modern times, people tend to use their spoons only to go after communal desserts, usually involving birthday candles, cake, chocolate, ice cream, nuts and whipped cream. My family eats polenta for breakfast on Ash Wednesday or other days ending in Y.

My grandmother asked if I had paid for the polenta when I told her that I had ordered the dish in a restaurant. I guess she thought that the restaurant whipped it up for me just for walking in with an unknown ailment. She knew that all good kitchens keep cornmeal on hand, but she was never sure how to spell the word, *polenta*. It seems odd to eat something so basic to life and yet with no linguistic imprint that can be put on a menu. Yet millions of people accomplish that feat every day, thankful to have the nourishment in their mouths no matter what it tastes like or how the word is pronounced or configured.

It seems like the history of comfort food would serve as a lesson in shared common urges. People over the centuries needed small movable feasts to tide them over in hard times.

Before we had cathedrals, churches, temples, synagogues and mosques, we had kitchens. They and their minimal staffs had to work hard, hunting and gathering, trading and stealing, bargaining and lying, to find and provide real and spiritual sustenance and clean water, or people did not live to see another day.

People who were the winners forget their moral codes for procuring food, soothing their consciences and their consciousness, after the conspiring, the conscriptions, and the conflagrations. War, famine, genocide, politics, plague, and tsunami never leave our past lives or our immediate ones, and in these times of horror, war victims and refugees spend much of their time in the quest for any food or any water, clean or otherwise.

War-induced famine is not a modern invention even though our weapons and soldiers serve to make it happen faster and more efficiently. The Roman siege on Jerusalem and the Thirty Years War are two events known for the politics and the carnage, but the famine, not so much. After the invention of canning in 1809, Napoleon's troops were fortified to invade, rape, loot and pillage. In England during World War I, 40% of the men were unfit to join the army because of malnutrition, and with that knowledge they, and all military cooks since then to this very day in Iraq and Afghanistan, have worked to improve the nutrition of soldiers with abandon. Stalin in the 1930s and again during World War II denied food to millions of Russia's

own citizens, ethnic minorities, and political prisoners. The Nazis lied to their own troops at the front about winning and the availability of supplies and doomed them along with the millions they starved in the concentration camps. Some medics in Iraq in 2009 asked people back in the States to send food: the US military provided breakfast and dinner, but not lunch.

Mao, during the Great Leap Forward, rerouted food, wheat, corn and rice from the farmers and starved millions in order to feed the city workers and the military forces. Because the farmers of the provinces put sand and straw under their stores of wheat and corn to show the bureaucratic inspectors that they had met their quota, they were left with nothing, not realizing that their "surplus" would be taken for government use. In fact the Chinese government made many farmers make "steel" in their backyards or farm mountain ledges where crops could not flourish to prove that a refocused community will could make a difference in the success of their industries and their harvests. Poet Zhang Zhimin echoes the horrifying commands, "Make wet rice, wheat, and yellow corn grow on top of the mountain;/And beans, peanuts, and red gaoliang (sorghum) rise on sheer rocks." The mass delusion was overwhelming and complicit.

In the period between 1846 and 1878, it is estimated that human lives lost in China from overpopulation, famine, floods, and civil wars numbered over 44,000,000. Millions of people

also died from war-induced famine in the latter part of the twentieth century in places like Biafra, Bangladesh, Japan, Kampuchea, Zimbabwe, Somalia, India, Korea, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Bosnia.

We fatten men up for the slaughtering and lead the victims of war like hungry lambs to the slaughter. Overwhelming numbers of dead and maimed soldiers pierce or numb us. John Donne's entreaty, the reminder that "each man's death diminishes us," seems lost in the comfort zones of our historic denial. We are not "involved with mankind."

Comfort food becomes the finger food, the fringe benefits of the winners, we "eaters of flour" according to Homer. It combats stress temporarily, defusing the nebulous memories of the questionable costs of the winning, floating away like my grandmother's raviolis in steaming broth. The uncomfortable history of food distribution is dismal from the first day that Tribe A did not share with Cave B. Today's denials of the urgency in the Sudan and too many other places are thwarted by contrived justifications over political struggles. The very idea of keeping people from eating the "cheap bread with which the welfare of the masses is so ultimately concerned" should and must stick in our collective craw. The idea must be considered too cruel anywhere. Food cannot be comfort just for the winners. Wheat and corn must be comfort for us all. The comfort of sharing food must be a given.

The political hoarding of grain is not necessarily violent or overt: it can reflect the slow, legal yet deliberate reallocation of land. USDA statistics tell us that 70% of the grain produced in the U.S. and 40% of the world's supply is fed to livestock—primarily cattle. The descendants of Gagliaudo's cow ended up as too many all-beef patties, and they didn't save anyone's city. Many precious rain forests and prairie acres a day are lost to grazing cows for the world's beef consumption. Channeled directly to humans rather than diverted to cattle, this grain would provide a huge difference in comforting people with famine relief. Ask the victims of politically-motivated famine that question, but hurry. People who do not have the access to the comfort of food do not speak loudly, or at all.

The Bantu feel that the exchange of food serves as a contract between people, a "clanship of porridge." In Long Bow Village in northern China, the villagers eat *keta,* corn dumplings at breakfast, corn noodles for lunch, and to celebrate the harvest, wheat noodles at dinner. Jews eat horseradish at Seder dinners to commemorate their ancestors' struggles in Egypt. The ancient god Mais reminds the Hopi to revere corn, and in Chinese Taoism, humans do not search for the apple in the paradise garden but instead the peach of immortality.

At my grandmother's house, cook and eat and be well. Cooking good food is medicine; sharing good food, a mental health program; eating good food together, communion.

We mark our days with meals and celebrate our lives with rituals: Sunday-night dinners, grave sites and funeral tables, with great displays of heaped-up platters that make us feel better about not having enough of something (maybe love), surviving while some people do not, (maybe luck), and relishing the abundance that accompanies being on one of the sides that wins (maybe grain).

Lunchability

(for Amber Jensen)

That boy, that gross boy in sixth grade, used to spoon big globs of mustard and ketchup from the bowls on the cafeteria table into his mouth. Then he would show this mixture to me much like in the movie *Big* where Tom Hanks' taller and older self and his shorter younger friend eat ice cream sundaes and then take the cherries for a ride on their undulating tongues while making gurgling and gagging boy noises: aylghaylghaylgh.

My sixth grade lunch consisted of a ham sandwich cut into party squares, celery and carrot sticks, and four sugar cookies, all folded in tight waxed-paper packets with a folded white paper napkin in a new brown paper sack. We got through the short only-milk line so we could pick our seats and start eating our lunches. The cafeteria ladies, or sometimes a mother who did not work outside the home, sold us school white milk, a drink you could smell before you opened the envelope paper lid. Most days no straws. No matter--the milk was often frozen with slushy white ice that we could hear when we shook the carton. We were supposed to offer up our frozen milk to the starving children in China. Sister Frances Elizabeth was not happy with my genuine offer to have her send mine to Peking every day. I was not happy when she told me those children were going to Limbo because they knew God, but refuted Jesus. The Catholic Church lost me big time on that score. At lunch, I took my refuge in cookies.

My favorite cookies had a hole in the middle. Skinny girls like Camille LoBello and me could put our fingers in the hole and then eat around the cookie, leaving a ring of crumby goodness. If we were careful, and not very hungry, we could wear the cookie ring back to class unless Sister Carleen Marie caught us in the hall.

We sat in the cafeteria, 35 boys at one long table and 35 girls at another about ten feet away. The aisle was evident of the school's vain attempts to protect our virtue. On hamburger days, the cafeteria women, in their hairnets, set out factory-issued serving spoons in hospital-green melamine bowls of those red and yellow condiments. Back then there were no plastic-take-out- single-servings of mustard, ketchup or mayonnaise. I always brought my lunch from home and so did my friends.

On non-hamburger days, when I took out the washed and uniformly cut celery and carrots from my lunch sack, that gross boy at the next table pointed at me and yelled out, "RAABBBBBIIIIIIIITTTTTTTTTT," a loud combination of rabies, Rabb (the street I lived on), and rabbit, a small furry animal that purportedly should be the only creature that would eat the healthy green and orange portion of my lunch. Camille and I showed him our cootie shields, rolled our eyes, and ate our lunch in relative peace.

The other students spent precious minutes out of thirty standing in line, being dished out fragrant foods on a plastic tray. They didn't eat when we ate; they didn't eat with us; they had to eat fast and were late to recess where we had staked out turf for four-square tournaments or stood around in cool clumps of emerging hormones, clucking about the stupid-head boys and their cooties on the baseball field or our new princess phones or the Beatles' latest songs on our blue transistor radios that we smuggled in our coats from home. But they who stood in the long lines could receive something special that we could never even hope for in our sad brown paper lunch sacks from home: garlic bread. They lined up for it as if it were Communion.

When one of my friends from South Dakota was a little girl, her mother worked as a lunchroom lady who made the garlic bread, the most favorite cafeteria food in all the schools, in all the lands, and in all the decades. She melted six pounds of butter in a large vat and dunked week-old hamburger buns into the mixture, letting them soak. She then plopped them on large cookie sheets, sprinkled them with garlic powder, and baked them until they were hot and golden. Although absolutely filled with fat, this delectable dish was not made of any chemicals, just butter and bread and garlic. The ingredients in garlic butter mist today, the butter spray sanctioned by the USDA for use in schools, include canola oil, soy lecithin, concentrated natural butter flavor, natural garlic flavor (what on earth is this?), salt, beta carotene (natural color),

propellant, milk, and soy. The product has zero fat, cholesterol, and calories. It retains a very high smoke point, and I'm guessing, a very low taste point. But I bet cafeteria ladies make a load of garlic toast with Garlic Buttermist, "fresh from Wisconsin" without a stick of butter in sight.

The new guidelines for school lunches in the United States, if they are to honor and match the attempts of Food Network chef Jamie Oliver for school nutrition in the United Kingdom for the last three years, include balanced choices every day: vegetables, salads, homemade pies, fruit, and yogurt among the lasagnas, the roasted meats, and the cakes. Schools in Great Britain allow French fries only once a week and subsidize the availability of low-fat milk for all school-age children. Many high schools pulled the plugs on their vending machines and replaced the carbonated beverages with fruit juice, water, and milk. Schools in France never offer sandwiches or pizza or nuggets, but instead tomato salad, small steaks, hash, veal cutlets or chicken, an assortment of vegetables like peas, lentils, potatoes, spinach, even Brussels sprouts, and for dessert, yogurt, fruit or chocolate pudding. Many school districts in the United States encourage local schools to team up with local farms and dairies and bakeries to provide fresh products daily for school lunches, deemphasizing processed foods and

emphasizing low-fat fresh food and vegetables including celery and carrots. They teach children what a lentil is.

My husband recently visited my youngest of five stepsons at his school at lunchtime. He noticed they were giving a hard time to one sixth-grade girl who pulled out all sorts of leafy green things from her sack lunch. They pointed, made faces, and called her and her lunch gross. She kept chewing while the uncool boys chomped on garlic bread. My husband asked, "Can you guess who the grossest girl in my sixth grade class is now?" They said no. He yelled, “My wife!” "Ewwwwww" was the collective cootie-riddled cry.

That boy (a term my parents still use for him), who is not so gross in this century, makes me a healthy lunch every day. He puts a veggie burger with low-fat cheese on whole-wheat bread, a carton with peach yogurt, and a green apple in a new brown paper lunch bag. He never packs celery or carrots or remembers the napkin.

Sometimes at night I tell him how pleasant lunch can be when people do not show me the condiments in their mouths. He says that back in sixth grade I never moved my seat, as if I could, to get away from the daily onslaught of his churlish comments and vulgar displays. He says that I must have been long enamored with his smooth cafeteria moves. I just shake my head, watch him cook dinner, wave my cupped cootie-free hand and protect myself with the

shield. He makes the garlic toast with home-made bread, butter, and, garlic from our garden, and I take out the napkins.

For Cynthia, One of My Students

There is an old Asian tale of the Crane Maiden. A young woman, a stranger looking for a home, she visits an elderly couple that takes her in. She has a gift: spinning fine yarn into fabric behind a closed door, but the secret of her gift must stay a secret. No one may see it. The old man and the old woman sell the fabric at the market for food. When she does not deliver the fabric fast enough, the Crane Maiden spins the feathers of her own wings into the glorious fabric with the help of the whirring machine. For that is the secret: the maiden is also a bird. But one day the old woman becomes curious and watches the Crane Maiden perform this magic through a crack in the door. So then the Crane Maiden must leave. And when she flies away, she takes the magic with her. This must have been very disappointing for the old couple.

Here is a modern American tale of a School Maiden. A young Chinese girl, a stranger looking for a home, she visits Tennessee, a state that welcomes her. She displays the gifts of playing the cello and a prowess for mathematics, but the secret of her gifts does not stay a secret. We all see it. The young woman earns the honor to study medicine in California. When the fulfillment does not come deep enough, the School Maiden decides to spin languages inside of whirring

computers. For that is the secret: the maiden is also a human being. But one day the School Maiden becomes unhappy even after she earns a promotion and a cubicle in San Francisco. The School Maiden realizes that she has lost her way on the narrow path to success. So when her work makes the music fly away, she reconsiders the life of the job or the job of the life. She quits her job inside the constricted walls so that she can secure a window to look outside. This must have been very disappointing for her colleagues.

This is the updated American tale of the School Maiden. A Buddhist woman, a lonely woman, looking for love, she continues to see a Muslim boy from my class who welcomes her with his gifts of math and science, laughter, music. But the secret of their lives together is a compromise: between the red mouth surrounded by her luminous face and the red mouth above his brown shoulders, between the different ways of sharing the penetrating grace of an uncolored god. Neither of their families must see this. When the acceptance of even their friendship does not come calmly enough, the maiden-no-more keeps their love sunken like a hushed treasure in a deep pacific sea. For that is the secret: the maiden is also a woman. But one day their old parents make a discovery: seven years of short intimate and long distant love. So then the maiden, who probably isn't one now, and the boy, who helped her along that path, must choose

between their parents and their lives together. To be considerate, she writes two notes about being tired of choosing, leaves one in a white envelope on the kitchen table, wiped clean, in her apartment and one in a white envelope on the passenger seat of her car that she parks beside the Golden Gate Bridge. She does not write a note to the boy. Amid thirsty runners, each reaching for their horizontal ends, she walks to the middle near the vertical bridge spires. She climbs up the fence and onto the railing. She looks back to the road as she would a crack in the door. She raises her wings, jumps high, whirring, into the air to seek the magic now stolen, the music now silenced, and the love now separated, and, for a little while, flies.

This may or may not have been very disappointing to her parents.

Spain Train

Eleven thirty-four: the train is supposed to arrive there at 11:34. The next train. The next train. The next train leaves for San Sebastian at 11:45. What platform? What's the Spanish word for platform? Lofty thoughts. The train will get there. It is their job. The engineer's job. 11:18. His job is to get the train there on time. It's an industry, for god's sake. Their jobs are dependent on accuracy and efficiency. On time. Get to the next city to the next platform. Next city. Lofty thoughts. 11:20. Look out the window. Look out. Look out. Cows grazing in the shallows of the bay. Their feet are wet. No, those are hooves. Or is it hoofs. Look it up. Look up. Hooves or hoofs, wet either way. Wet cow hooves. Smelly wet cow hooves. They see the train. They see that the train is late. Even smelly cows can see that the train is late. Mother always says, Lofty thoughts. Look up. Laundry. Laundry, hanging from apartment windows. They look like the flags of families, waving. Flags waving. Wave goodbye. Wave goodbye to all the people on the platform. Will the train to go faster. Will it. Make it happen. Lean your body forward. Make it so. Make it go. Look up. 11:27. Ruins in the middle of olive groves. Plant around them. Go around them. Don't let things get in the way. Like time and trains and trains and time. Plant those trees. Olives and grapes. Mile after mile. Vineyards plus time equal wine. No time for grapes. No time for olives. Train time. 11:30. Graffiti. Graffiti. Graffiti. Sounds on the track. Sounds from the Spanish train. Gra--ffi--ti. Gra--ffi--ti. Look

up. Spires of trees. Spires of spruce trees, waving. Wave to the train, you stupid Spanish cows. 11:32. The next train will wait. Where is Barcelona? Barcelona? Make your tongue come out of your mouth like out of a train tunnel. Bar—tha--lo—na. Bar—tha—lon—a. Bar the door. That's a poem. Browning. Tennyson. Housman. Bar—the—fuckin--lona. 11:35. Late. Late. Already late. White rabbit. White rabbits are fast runners. Feed your head. Lof--ty lof--ty lof--ty. Feed your head. Rabbits are faster than this train. Look up. Villas and castles on top of hills. Suppose they were late? Late like this old Spanish train. Late? Or alone. Bar—the—alone. Alone. Signal fires from mountaintop to mountaintop. At least let some people know. Look up. Birds know how to migrate and make nests. What else do they know? What else do they know that we don't know they know? 11:40. Five minutes. Five minutes. Don't leave. Don't leave me. Birds are faster than trains. What tracks? Bird tracks. Don't leave. I'm getting there as fast as I can. Look up. The outskirts. Look back. Conquerors and ancestors. They came this way too. Only on really fast horses. No one is a conqueror by train. Even the ancestors of birds knew this. Look up. Tiled roofs. Tiled rooves. Rhymes with hooves. Hoofs. Faster than trains. The ancestors of conquerors, horses, and birds have come this way before. They arrived, but not this train. Not on time. Not on the platform, the platform in any language. 11:48. Brownish-red-three-legged dog in the train station. Dog of gypsies knows that the train

has already gone. His owner tells him in French, if you don't come, I will leave you. Don't leave the dog. The dog knew the train would leave. He knows the owner would leave. Look up. 11:52. Si tu ne viens pas, je te laisserai ici seul. Je suis seule. Bar—tha—lone—a. Loner. Alone in Barcelona. Loco locomotora. No motive for loco. No locomotive. Loon. No one. No, O, no.

Trained Children

Children, who speak French, practice their English and Spanish on the train, leaving France on the way to Spain. The mountains, like the languages, separate the two countries. I have failed Spanish seven times, one boy on the train says, laughing in French, laughing in English, not laughing in Spanish. I am a failure, he says, which in any language falls like a rock on the tracks under the rocking, rocking Spanish train itself, failing to make it to Barcelona on time for me to catch the next train to San Sebastián. The giggling German girls, incensed that they need reservations, do not comfort the younger German boys who are also removed from the train once the train breaches the border into Spain, once the conductors survey the passports, once they count the reservations, and once they empty the passengers with the blond eyelashes from the corridor. The frightened boys look up to the mountains, maybe hills to them, but high enough for flung-away boys to see that smoky clouds rest on top. Maybe they remember home, cooler and higher, definitely higher. They will surely remember the lowly Spanish train officials, refusing to honor their passes, holding them by the scruff of the neck, pitching them and their rucksacks off the Spanish train onto the stony pavement, keeping them from visiting another country during summer vacation, squiring them in the path of people trying to get on a Spanish train or off a Spanish train, ignoring their blinking tears. The German children do not see the

white peaches or the brown almonds or the white bread with peanut butter in the laps of those people left on the train, bobbing and clucking about their reservations and their tickets for the upright positions in the air-conditioned cars, rattling, swaying, braying on the way to Barcelona, the people who do not think *la Mediterranée* holds special water since they are so accustomed to seeing it, probably never swimming in it or eating a fish from its green waters, but instead gobbling down the thick and purple smoked meat from the narrow shops of hanging *jamón*. They do not feel the trains, scraping their sides along mountain tunnels, squeezing, reminding the trains to remember the ease of France and the country to the east. They only see the sleek white tripods, windmills for energy that will never be visited by tourists, used by millers, or captured by painters. They do not see the small white terns that must ponder and gauge their own wind speed and the windmills' wind-full unwillingness to hold weary creatures that need a rest and a ride before they nestle in the sand near a 300-year-old cathedral to dream about joining an Updike thread in a scarf of birds or landing on a broken finger of a statue in Assisi. My family's country is in the other direction, the other way, on the warmer side of France, where people honor the transparent ham that folds into crusty loaves, the rested birds that drink at dripping fountains, the bluest water that laps onto historical shores, and the loneliest children

who risk riding on trains to search for and find comfort in the land of the flour eaters, no matter what language they cry in or speak.

Mario

in the hot lights of the cooking demonstration on a casino stage in tunica mississippi, i sit fifty rows back, not at the closeup-v i p-high-dollah tables but near enough to hear his whispers, notice his sweat, eye his signature orange clogs.

i imagine that mario likes to be called O with friends or in times of intimacy. he gets lots of mileage out of Ooooooo just like the lovers and warriors in *for whom the bell tolls*, hemingway or metallica. he grows sixteen different kinds of basil in his herb garden which stretches along his three acres of hotbeds, some herbs, mostly vegetables: sweet white and yellow corn, tiny thai eggplants, japanese pumpkins, and wrinkled purple and black heirloom tomatoes. he makes his own sea salt from the waters off the coast of madagascar. he uses jelly beans and toblerone instead of poker chips. he raises his own sheep, goats, and buffalo for greek children to milk with which blind men make white shiny mozzarella cheese.

i bet when he goes to parma to buy thick wheels of golden cheese, the owners run out and kiss him (three times on his flushed cheeks) still on his motor scooter on the gravel even before he can get inside to see their wives, who later offer to undo his strawberry-blond pony tail while he offers to open their compromised virtue like figs cut with his signature ceramic paring knife and smeared with honey. the men who work for him love him, not as The god, but one of the lesser

ones, making him *padrino* to their children, small ones like telemachus, who will learn to hate the abandonment that follows the mythic quest for the perfect chive and goat cheese omelet. he laughs at onerous sous-chef jokes about the failings of their souffles when the weather turns too wet in memphis or new orleans or any city that bathes in humidity so dense that it feels like we're all swimming in *stracciatella alla romana* .

i wonder if he helps his sous chefs open their own bistros, eight tops, visiting their tucked-away kitchens warmed over in the fluorescent lights of suburban strip malls, maybe offering to help out in the steamy kitchen on a rare busy night, but never showing up, instead boffing their wives in the city, wearing only aprons tied at their necks, on the cold granite of their own kitchen tables where he dreams of pushing off bottles of thick cream and bowls of hard-red apples and splintered crates of chard from the top of the long country tables covered in white flour where they rolled pasta all afternoon, his clogs kicked off on the cold scored concrete floor and thrown near the well-stocked pantry where the women--the young virgins, the mamas, and yes, even the nonnas--dream of his shorts at his ankles.

i do not know these things about mario batali: the greatest chef in the culinary universe. just because i want him to be a master at all things does not mean that he is. he seems like such a good italian man, a man my italian grandmother would have loved, a man with big appetites, a

man whose spaghetti gravy is almost as thick and brown as her own, a blond man, but like robert taylor, a handsome american movie actor who, she said, could put his shoes under her bed any day. and she said this often in front of my italian grandfather, a meat cutter, whose weona grocery store in memphis on mcclemore avenue now stands inside stax records. his response to her: O, rosie, O signore. and he walked away pretending to be afraid of who she might lie with, and he walked away smarting, at the thought that she might cook for someone else besides him if she just had the opportunity. O rosie. this one phrase about robert taylor was my only sex talk.

offered instead: thousands of lessons on cooking for insatiable mouths, waiting around pressed white tablecloths of crisp cutwork from Bassignana, talking and eating and laughing every sunday night during dinner, no fretting with placing clogs or feigning, Oooooooo.

Farm Day

They start bugging me in October.

When next summer? When is it? And I have to tell them that I have no idea because no one has yet to finalize their plans about summer school, work, and vacations. They really have no concern about the farmers or the weather or the growing season or the specifics of the picking. They want to know *that* it will happen, like waiting, expecting, depending on the tender green shoots of crocus and hyacinth to sprout after a short cold drippy Memphis winter.

They didn't respond so enthusiastically the first time I planned this, this day of picking the food from plants and eating only food either made from someone's hands, picked by your personal hands or by farmers whose faces you can actually look at. The children put the plants the farmers grew in the earth in the paper bags to be weighed and purchased because that's all they get to eat on this one day, this Farm Day.

My family has been celebrating farm rituals for many years. It began again when we took my Italian grandmother, Rosa Caligaris Gallina, out to pick peaches every summer at Jones Farm, off Highway 51, north of Memphis. She could outpick us in quantity and quality even when she was in her eighties. She grew up on her family's farm on what is now the abandoned Kennedy Hospital, the home of WKNO, and the University of Memphis student housing. Her

family grew tomatoes, beans, sweet potatoes, radishes, carrots and beets. The men of the family loaded up their trucks and sold their vegetables to Weona, Kroger, and Easy Way grocery stores for years. When they all got married, her brothers owned more farms: Uncle Camillo Caligaris had the farm where Toyota sells cars on Germantown Road and another on Mullins Station. My Uncle Joe Martini ran the Penal Farm, now Shelby Farms, the largest park in Memphis, for almost thirty-five years. His job was to supervise the prisoners who worked the fields and orchards, harvesting the vegetables and fruit. The farm fed all the prisoners, the staff, and everyone at John Gaston Hospital. It was a self-sufficient farm with a dairy and chickens. The only items they bought were sugar and coffee.

When my mother, Dorothy Gallina Neely, was a little girl, she and my Uncle Daniel Martini would play in these fields where the buffalo roam today at Shelby Farms. They would bite into raw turnips and when their mouths would foam up as turnips are wont to do when they meet saliva, they pretended they were dogs, rabid with white froth gushing from their growling faces.

When I was growing up, for days and weeks my grandmother, my great-grandmother Teresa Gatti Gallina, and assorted aunts canned peaches, green beans, green bell peppers with onions and garlic, pears, Concord grape jelly, and tomatoes that would eventually become one of

the daily soups or the family's spaghetti gravy. I rollerskated in the big dark basement that used to hold wine during the Prohibition years while they put up jars under the house in Glenview Park off Lamar Avenue. Those jars stood there like family, jars, gold and red and green and purple globes of forethought: planning, planting, picking, washing, cooking, putting up, and waiting for fall and winter. Never would it have occurred to my family not to do this ritual every year in Italy for centuries, and in America since 1902. But our family's practice of seasonal canning died when the farmland was sold to other people.

I thought that perhaps we should forsake the mad dog antics in our modern Farm Day ritual. Instead, my daughter, my stepsons, my niece and nephew, and any friends whom Jacob, the youngest stepson, can convince to get up and go out on a summer morning at 6 a.m., gather at our house in Midtown Memphis. We go to breakfast at La Baguette on Poplar Avenue near the new library. If it is Bastille Day, which has happened on several occasions, my daughter and her boyfriend, both singers, must suffer through my singing of *La Marseillaise* in the restaurant. My stepsons roll their eyes and try to look away. They cannot get too far away stuffed with warm gooey cinnamon rolls and chocolate milk. We have also eaten breakfast at Taste-O's in Frayser, their pumpkin donuts filling white paper bags. Alas, they and their hot doughnuts are no more.

At breakfast I give each young person ten one-dollar bills. Their mission, if they choose to accept it, is to pick and buy fresh food to eat that night for dinner. Over the years we have cheated and bought meat and bread for the dinners as well, but that night we cover the table with vegetables and desserts, all picked by hand, cooked fresh, all homemade, nothing from a can or a box. Just food from the earth.

We go to three places: Jones Farm to pick peaches and blackberries; the Harris farm on Sledge Road to pick blueberries; and the Memphis Farmer's Market downtown to buy the rest. Every year's menu is different, and I try to stay out of the selections of the children. They must spend their dollars wisely. They have to talk it out, see what the others have bought, pool their resources, and calculate the numbers of portions for the number of hungry people who will be eating our feast that night. They choose and I cook. It's a balance of trading skills, exactly like people used to do every day when most people lived on farms or knew someone who did.

We have experienced a few minor mishaps. One year, my stepson Johnny got excited and threw away all of his money in the garbage can at Jones Farm. We have all gotten sunburned. Bees chase us. I had no idea what to do with two pounds of banana peppers that my youngest stepson Jacob's friend from Brazil presented me until he gave me his mother's recipe for them, stuffed with white cheese, battered and deep-fried. I baked them with breadcrumbs,

but they were still heavenly. Now we make sure to get those long yellow peppers so we can make that appetizer every year. And one summer when Jacob was six, he got up too early, tiptoed into the kitchen, opened the freezer and ate ice cream before anyone else was up. That, after some major frowning and fussing, of course, became another summer ritual, Ice Cream-for-Breakfast Day.

That afternoon, after a morning of picking, we go home to rest. Then the children, who are not so little anymore, unload the car, and I get out the cookbooks. My pickles do not come out after one day in brine so I have to put them up weeks before Farm Day. For supper, over the years, we have served baked onions, fried eggplant patties, sautéed squash, sliced tomatoes served with home-grown basil and fresh mozzarella cheese, cooked myriad kinds of beans and peas, poured chilled vichyssoise, concocted corn casseroles, devised fruity cobblers, and offered cold watermelon from a big washtub filled with ice just as my grandmother used to do. And the children eat dishes of food on this day they would otherwise ignore on the tables of family and strangers. They picked it so they eat it.

This year our special day is July 24. If, on that day, you see a wandering group of sleepy, city people, laughing and joking, picking purple and yellow food off bushes and trees, taking pictures of themselves, standing next to bushel baskets full of blueberries and peaches,

join them. We would love to have the company. And although we should do this ritual more often as a seasonal habit and not as a special event, we practice, trying to reconnect our twenty-first century selves and our children to the earth.

Dying For Pie

One of the greatest pleasures of life is to have visitors.

One of the greatest pleasures of death is to have visitors who bring pie.

The ultimate comfort food is pie. Even Eric Cartman from South Park agrees: pehhhhhhhh, he cries to his mother. And when my grandmother died, I cried to my mother. But we're Italian, and Northern Italians don't usually make pie for funerals. We don't make inverted meat pies, lasagna, in the best of times. We leave that dish to southern Italians and Americans to bring to the funeral table.

Southerners think about pie the way many people think about sex, but more often. Less bother and mess. With pie comes commitment. You don't just make them for anyone. We consider pie a gift in the event of someone's death. We fuss over the recipe: sweet or savory. We help lay it out on the dining room table after we hear the sad news, for dinners and suppers that week, and for the meal after the funeral service. And often we bring pie months later when the business of death comes to an end as well.

As soon as we receive an ominous phone call, we start the food gathering process. In fact, we think about the possibility of tragedy before the pies intervene: we have ingredients on stand-by in our pantries and freezers. Memphis bakeries and Memphis bakers make Southern

dough, rising to the occasion in the face of adversity. We make piemaking seem effortless, seamless, crackless. Well, some of us do.

I found this essay's first sentence on the website of Linden, Tennessee, in Perry County, a small town in the hills overlooking the Tennessee Buffalo River. And to that town, a town that has been suffering with 27% unemployment, Governor Bredesen sent some stimulus money. And with that money the people of Linden decided to reestablish the Armstrong Pie Company, first built there in 1946, putting 300 people to work, making 3000 pies (turnovers and pie crusts) each day.

I bought a case of these pie crusts in a gesture of solidarity. I also bought pie crusts because I can't make them from scratch. They don't turn out. I can't make cornbread rise either. Or pizza dough. My grandmother always said I had something wrong with my pointy-piano fingers. However, I can make the hell out of the insides of a pie.

Too sad to eat ordinary food, the grieving welcome exceptional pies: Kentucky Bourbon Chocolate Pecan Pie, Lemon Chess Pie (often called Funeral Pie), Chocolate Cream Pie, Key Lime Pie, Sweet Potato Pie, Cinnamon Apple Pie, Peach and Blueberry Pie, and Golden Coconut Pie. I received a wholesome Tomato Pie from my friend Erin the week Bella, our golden retriever, died, and I dislocated my elbow playing wiffle-ball with my students.

Oh, some people choose not to make pie, bring pie, or honor pie, but they bring loving homemade foods to funeral tables just the same: tart lemon squares, chicken tetrazzini, savory spiral ham with tiny biscuits and Jezebel sauce, tall coconut cakes, pimento cheese (pronounced *peminna*, accent on the second syllable) made with homemade mayonnaise (goes without saying), corn pudding without too much cayenne pepper, tuna salad and chicken salad sandwiches with the crusts cut off, tomato aspic (almost frozen), deviled eggs or church eggs, crusty macaroni and cheese, bread and butter pickles, pound cake with a lemon glaze (also good for breakfast), green bean casserole with French's fried onion rings, pickled shrimp, a whole beef tenderloin, chocolate cake with chocolate icing, and banana pudding with vanilla wafers sunk deep—all in glass or on silver (depending on how well you know or how much you like the family of the deceased). We bring gallons of sweet tea. We cut thick slices of lemons. We take out the seeds. We bring vodka and drugs to the house if called upon.

Some people go the way of convenience: cold cuts and Pepperidge Farm party breads, fruit plates thick with strawberries and pineapple, and vegetable plates with blue cheese or ranch dressing. Some order pizza or barbeque. Some bring fried chicken: grocery-store-bought, KFC-bought or home-fried. Commendable people take the chicken out of the boxes and place the pieces in dishes that are inconspicuous on the table, the grieving guests none the wiser.

Funeral food must comfort the people who are not dead. My friend Liz remembers a funeral procession, all the cars stopping at Bozo's Barbeque in Jackson on the way to the cemetery as per her friend's request before she died. My friend Martha and her sisters were looking in a chiffarobe for her mother's funeral attire where they found three thousand dollars and a note: buy liquor and have a party. One of my former students, Jennifer Lee, is in the culinary program at UTK. Her grandmother who lives with them in Germantown makes Italian spaghetti with meat sauce when someone dies. They eat the dish with chopsticks. When the family objects, she waves her hand and says in Chinese: just eat it--the long noodles will give you long life. When her mother died, my friend Linda's family had two funeral meals, one here with Memphis barbeque and one in southern Illinois where people brought mounds of mostaccioli and mashed potatoes and slabs of roast beef with thick gravy so that everyone could take home filled plastic freezer bags, like doggie bags for the living.

Of course there are some people who do not realize that food is a gift in times of trouble. They know no recipes by heart. They have no family recipes that don't involve the microwave, chili, Sex-On-The-Beach cake, beer, beef jerky, and popcorn. One dot-com company ships funeral food right to your door in their Fruit and Gourmet Tower for Sympathy: twelve pieces of fruit, sausages, non-alcoholic vanilla pear cider, chocolate-covered cherry candies, garlic cheese

crackers, dried fruit mix, filet mignon and chocolate toffee. No pie. The on-line catalog tells you that once you've finished the snacks, you can use the keepsake boxes to hold photographs of your loved ones. My family would call that idea tacky (pronounced tackeh, accent on the first syllable), at best. My God, where would you place that stack as part of your decor?

Funeral food should be delicious. The dish should be easy to carry from your car to someone else's table. The dish should not require a big space in the refrigerator or oven. The dish should not require constant attention like stirring or reheating. The dish should have your name in permanent marker on masking tape on the bottom and be accompanied by functional utensils. The dish should not be drippy so that you mess up your funeral clothes. The dish should warm a grieving heart as well as fill an empty stomach. The dish should be pie.

FromToInAround San Miguel

"I do know how to pay attention . . . how to be idle and blessed . . . ."
Mary Oliver

In Central Mexico, the writers from everywhere but here ride in a big bus through the soft mountains of San Miguel de Allende worn down long ago by wind and by oceans and by war and by mining, unlike the crags of Monte Carlo. The summer clouds on the Bajio mountains do not leave after the morning, but stay and dust the valleys. People walk out of their scoured doors and into clouds to face the day. The writers see the poor people, but ignore the poverty. Or maybe we stuff it down deep. Picking up a pencil saves no one. Our heads stay bent over manuscripts and computer screens. We are delusional. We are as overwhelmed as the people we step over to get to the bakery with the blue door. If we look up at the people we might have to do something about our blind complicit hearts. So--what do we do instead? We look at the scenery.

Two kinds of cactus compete here for attention, one with spikes and one with spires; the ones with the spires are winning, but in the freshly-plowed fields, no cactus, and now, only a promise of corn. But in the sparse orchards, planted long ago, cactus thrives; the needled shrubs grow even if no one plants them, offering specious protection like a hedgerow.

The aqueducts here do not look like the ones the Romans built with their higher-than-possible arches to bring water, gushing into towns; the curves here are smaller, flatter. They seem to bring little, if any, water and from unknown places: mountain streams and lakes lie far away, their beaches strewn with refuse from the townspeople who dump there.

Men hold babies and men hold bicycles, but never at the same time at the Tuesday Mercado in San Miguel. Women do not hold bicycles. No ugly children reside here even though I have seen about five hundred of the small faces, still in school in the middle of July. Perhaps their parents hide the ugly ones, the way we do in America, the way we would certainly hide the tiny white coffins piled high in their store-front windows.

One little boy, about three years old, plays with a raw egg. The only toy anywhere around him, the yolk breaks and commingles with dirt-straw. Then he stirs it with a stick from a spindly tree that someone picked up far from this desert. He does not look up to ask for permission or affirmation. He is having a fine time.

My friend Christine, who tells good stories when she is drinking as well as when she is not, makes guacamole on the bus, but she offers no dripping-hot tortilla chips from La Pamplona or bread from the Blue Door Bakery. She offers dried Melba toast to scoop up the mashed avocado, and we love her for this gesture. We do not remind her of the night before and the cool

salty chill of the avocado soup and the heat of the squash blossom enchiladas at the *Bugambila* restaurant on Hidalgo Street, six blocks off the *Jardin*. We offer gifts of preoccupied ennui: our silent smiling and nodding and chewing and choking.

Esso signs offer the possibility of gasoline and mechanical help when our bus breaks down, but neither exists. We stop among pink-washed houses with blue windows, and we say, wander and let slip the dogs of summer. We watch, waving, while many trucks, unwavering, rush past us to places we cannot spell or hope to visit or understand how they exist in the desert of financial poverty. We rumble up to a *mecanico*, a word painted on too many walls, a *servicio technico*, a necessity every few dry kilometers along the highway.

We pass faded buildings: patched and parched abandoned broken with the beginnings of compound courtyards and then nothing else, built by those who erect these walls and then leave for reasons we cannot imagine. Some houses stand on the precipices of the world, overlooking and holding on by sheer will to the holes left by Spanish strip mining or American oil-drilling sites. No mountain homes exist for those with more money, for no one possesses even the worn-out promise of more money, at least not here.

Factory smoke, like *molé*, rises from fifteen chimneys with no attention to filters or regulations, blowing for hundreds of miles to the east, dropping its thick brown heaviness on

crops and lakes and people on its way to the ocean sand where it rains into the sea and rises as one of the lesser-white clouds over Cuba. We all know there is no new water, right?

The old women cook *gorditas* filled with *barbacoa*, grilled goat and pork. I believe that the old women do not notice how their walls and all the walls in all the towns exist in this country, with varied facades: cement block, corrugated metal, graveled rocks, painted aluminum, missed and matched brick, brown stones, closed gates, advertisements, graffiti. I believe that the old women do not notice the cemetery next door whose tombs and monuments look like the Korean alphabet, thick with circles and appendages like the folded arms of sullen cactus. I believe that drugs, alcohol, and religion help to inspire, regulate, and bind the learned blindness.

The grandmothers do not notice the man pushing his plow, a thick metal blade, through the hard desert earth with just his strength and his horse cabled to his gray-sand donkey. And he does not notice the women until he becomes thirsty. The tired women do not notice the lone sheep, the lonely donkey, the lone man sanding the earth. The lone women do not notice that we are back on the bus on our way to San Miguel, a place with a pleasant seat and a polished sweeter air.

I believe that poor people, wherever they live, feel an abrasive gritty weariness so pervasive that to speak of it aloud is a labored point: their faces betray the constant and ominous lack of resources and choices. They wear this the way the donkeys here have worn the rough woven blankets under their saddles for hundreds of years.

If we notice their poverty, what else should we do? If they notice their poverty, what else could they do? They keep walking on steep uncertain paths that lead them, keep them away from the noticing their poverty only monetary. We, the writers whose footprints will not offer much, if any, permanence, keep riding in a bus with matching tires. The bus takes us away from noticing too much to be aristocrats but enough to be anxious to repress when we finally leave, our poverty only spiritual.

We are the idle and the blessed. We do not want to notice the lack of reckoning. But we borrow the surface anguish gathered among the snippets of empathy and wash it all down with shots of vodka in a country with many kinds of thorny cactus, a country that grows no potatoes.

We get to keep writing.

The History of Jiffy Pop

The secret behind popcorn is the tiny bead of water inside each kernel. After the water boils, the heat entices the water to make steam for one second, and the corn explodes, turning itself inside out and into a white puff. Add butter and salt, and in my Italian house, Parmesan cheese. Those seeds, the ones that are not comprised of 14% water, and therefore do not pop, are called dead soldiers.

The Aztecs munched on popcorn since before the 1400s and believed that popcorn popped because a spirit living inside the seed became angry when his domain, heated by outside forces and his violent anger, caused him to explode. They also believed that one of their gods would return to them in the form of a combined being. So when Cortes got off the boat, and he was riding on top of his horse, the Aztec leaders thought the Spanish leader and his men were those gods from the sea foretold by all of those stories around massive campfires where they probably served popcorn balls as a snack. The Spanish killed those Aztec leaders and 17 million more of those popcorn growers with their weapons and their germs.

In 1960, Jiffy Pop Popcorn reached the national U.S. market. Fred Mennen, the inventor from Indiana, also received a patent in 1977 for his invention of an instrument for detecting gonorrhea.

Jiffy Pop combines unpopped popcorn kernels and oil in an aluminum foil container fused to a metal handle with a folded aluminum foil lid: packaging as well as pan. As the pan is heated, the popping corn causes the thin tinfoil to unfold and puff up. The popcorn maker, a title role in most households, keeps the contraption moving over a heat source until most of the popcorn has popped, sending the kernels up against the expanding bonnet of hot air, hot oil, and a hot aluminum mushroom cloud. How ironic a product that children could snack on at night after they had practiced duck and cover exercises at school that day. The misrepresentation of the ease of its design, and probably some lawsuits concerning burned children, led to microwave popcorn's taking Jiffy Pop Popcorn's place on the grocery store shelves. Some websites suggest looking for it on the bottom shelf under all the other popcorn products, like an embarrassing relative, hidden away under the stairs.

I knew that the timeliness of Jiffy Pop Popcorn was in danger when it transcended the world of snack foods and entered the world of slang and popular culture.

From the *Urban Dictionary*:

Slant #1: A large pubic bush on a woman so big that it makes her white panties appear to rise (nice use of imagery and the metaphorical). Example: Shit, that ho got her some kinda jiffy pop on.

Slant #2: To fuck someone with corn on the cob, using butter as a lubricant (hence a change in syntax from a noun to a verb). Example: I jiffy popped that ho with a fresh ear a corn. Usage of the imperative mood still in deliberation in France, as in: Jiffy pop me.

Slant #3: A large teased-up hairstyle kept up with myriad coats of hair spray, entailing plastic rain bonnets when outdoors, special neck pillows for sleeping to keep that do fresh, and frequent mirror checks, complaining about a big-haired person blocking someone's view, for instance, at a wedding, a movie theatre or a concert (used as colloquial diction; can be used in the plural). Example: Bitch, I could see the band till those two jiffypops sat in front a me.

Saturday Night Live used the concept in a skit of containing heat and corn where popcorn fills a car's airbag upon impact. The show's writers kept the exploding bonnet concept in the design ballooning out from the steering wheel. Their catch phrase: Because we don't want you to walk away from your next accident on an empty stomach . . . now in Cheddar Cheese. The actor playing the spokesman in that skit was Phil Hartman. He's not around anymore. His wife popped him with a gun in their California home.

In the first *Scream* movie, Drew Barrymore is in the process of making Jiffy Pop when she receives the phone call from that scary guy in the mask. Apu in *The Simpsons* describes their version of the snack, Chintzy Pop, as not being very good since a third of their kernels are

baby teeth. Johnny Storm, one of the Fantastic Four, makes Jiffy Pop in his hot little hands in the 2005 film. Flame on! He had to be careful not to allow the bottom of the pan to get too hot. Burned popcorn is one of the worst lingering smells in the universe.

My pen pal from Ireland (1968-1977, Bill Hagan) did not believe that popcorn could be my favorite food. In Ireland, as well as all of Europe, farmers grow popcorn to feed animals. Of course Bill also believed that there were no cities in the middle of the United States except for Chicago, and that we could grow anything in the middle of the country full of farms of wheat and corn. He thought we grew popcorn in our back yard. I asked him if he had ever made Jiffy Pop. I asked him what his parents fixed for snacks when they watched movies all together on Friday nights. He wrote back and asked me what I was talking about. After nine years of correspondence, he believed that Americans said, did, and ate some pretty strange things.

Eventually my family considered Jiffy Pop a whimsical extravagance. We had a perfectly good, according to my mother, regular popcorn popper, and we were going to use that forever, and we did, until its plastic bonnet melted on the stove. Our next step was to worship, as did millions of others, in front of the invention that would transform the nutritional intake of city dwellers all over the world, the microwave. The chemicals that migrate from microwave popcorn bags into popcorn eaters like conquerors coming to visit unwary native peoples on

shores in faraway lands include perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), part of a class of compounds that may be linked to infertility in humans. In animal testing, these chemicals cause liver, testicular, and pancreatic cancer. Studies show that microwaving causes the chemicals in the paper bag to vaporize. The chemicals do not wash away; they stay in our bodies for years and accumulate. Researchers worry that levels in humans could approach the amounts causing cancers in laboratory animals. DuPont and other manufacturers have promised to phase out PFOA by 2015 under a voluntary EPA plan, but millions of microwave popcorn bags will be sold between now and then.

In the Jiffy Pop world, the best place to pop the corn is over a fire while camping, the market for the product today. Although ConAgra, the company that now owns the patent, encourages people to buy Act II, their microwave brand, many outdoor enthusiasts continue to buy Jiffy Pop for their campfire cookouts despite the fact that much of the Jiffy Pop, sitting on the lowest dustiest shelves, dwells in the land of past expiration dates.

The solution is to return to the simple tasks reminiscent of our Native American roots:

Find dry wood.
Build a fire.
Make a pot.

Find dried corn.
Squeeze an olive.
Put corn and oil in the pot

Cover the pan with a big leaf.
Make sure the leaf is not poisonous.

Hold over fire.
Listen for the first few pops.
Shake the pot.
Listen for popping noises to stop.

Keep fingers, toes, children, and old people out of the fire.
Pop the children if they get too near the fire.
Pop on a band-aid.

Scrape salt off rocks at the beach.
Not near a beach? Dang it.
Realize that popcorn, as a snack in this region will suck for millennia.

Take a pop at anyone who tries to steal your snack.
Pop the question to anyone that helps you with all of these steps.
Share the popcorn.

Remember that popcorn, even if it is not Jiffy Pop, is *as much fun to make as it is to eat*.

My Sister Mulan

At the end of the film *Mulan*, the title-character's father throws down the sword and hugs her because she has brought the family honor by taking his place in battle. Then I have to pretend my allergies are acting up; I have terrible allergies at the end of *Mulan*. We, Mulan and I, do not cry in the light of day for anything real, just in the dark for the creatures and the creature comforts that are missing from her life and mine.

I am the odd daughter. I made mistakes: played ball with the boys, climbed fences, ran away from home, wanted a treehouse, talked to strangers, took longer-than-necessary naps, hitchhiked, rode my bike fast, wanted to be Chinese, watched movies, collected traffic tickets, got cancer, liked to read, talked back to nuns, drained the gas tank, lost my slip and keys and virginity, left the cake plate under the bed, fell in the lake, dated and married the wrong boys, left the church, threw my sister's Barbie's head away (there was a tornado in the driveway!), got fired, blocked the plate, ignored sewing, traveled alone, lost friends, tortured my sister, stole the skateboard, sang loudly when inebriated, left moldy laundry in the washing machine, dislocated my elbow, spent too much money, let the dachshund sleep behind my knees, didn't wear make-up, double-fisted martinis . . . .

Of course, I think I remember doing some good things pretty well during some odd decade beginning with a 19 or even 20. I am sure my father believes that he needs only one hand to count them. My mother and my sister would agree with that accounting system.

They might count the last good thing I tried to do: interview my father about what he did during the Korean War. Right now the interview is at the bottom of my schoolbag. I told him I would give him a copy of it soon. Maybe I will. If he reads it, he won't like it. It won't be quite good enough. Something will need to be changed. He will want to add/change/delete or delete/change/add. I have never been able to predict what things my father will say, only the things he will not.

Mulan was not a good daughter either. Her father told her that she had dishonored him until someone told him differently. Oh, and that guy was the emperor of China. My father might be proud of a fifteen-page interview. Maybe. If the Library of Congress says so. My father and I--we are very polite to one another. I may never know what he really thinks about me. I choose to believe that he loves me. Disney gave Mulan a dragon and a cricket, two helpful companions in archetypal myth.

Mulan pretended to possess some stones. She knew she had to go away to get away and to get away to get a *way*. The way. Tao.

I thought I was very brave broaching the subject of a taped interview. I am still amazed that he said yes. Of course I told him that my friend in Arizona needed the information for her book on military veterans. He said yes immediately to that request. I spent about two hours thinking of questions, not the ones I should ask, but instead the ones I thought that he would answer. This interview would be for all the girls who never got to talk to their fathers about important things or really anything. And I have it on tape, so his voice will last forever.

He sat at the wooden table in my parent's kitchen where someone covered everything in beige: the refrigerator, walls, granite countertops, and kitchen linens. I set up the recorder. I think my father was surprised that I knew how to work this tiny piece of technology. I did not tell him that I practiced for hours, making sure that everything worked smooth and seamlessly. I felt my mother fluttering behind me. He could see her, but I could not. He looked at her too often during the interview, but I sacrificed urgent spontaneity for the longer opportunity to hear my father talk to me about his past, history that was important to him and to his family.

Sometimes my mother was helpful, filling in my father's eighty-year-old memories that she has shared with him for fifty-six years. Many times, to be certain, she squashed many spicy stories because, we say in unison, would the word or action be I) Top Drawer? II) Upper Strata? III) Commendable? These three questions have framed my entire social, political, economic,

environmental, cultural, and religious existence. If anyone has a dilemma, and people worry about which way to choose, these questions can be repeated as needed. People might do the wrong thing, but, by god, they WILL get things done. Mulan had thousands of Confucian ideals, Legalist laws, and the *sangang* (the Three Cardinal Virtues: monarch guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife) to guide her disobedient steps. My family honors those who live by the Three Ritual Questions and judges without impunity those who fail to implement them.

The first question, I thought, was a short pop fly: What do you remember about World War II when you were a child? He has always loved talking about his childhood in California. Although he has lived in Memphis for the last 54 years, his essence resides in southern California. He has never been comfortable here, so to have an opportunity to go back, if only in memories, was a welcome treat for him.

My father remembered that they had gone out to his grandmother's house on December 7, out in Perris, California. Their car did not have a radio. They drove by March Air Force Base and saw two planes take off, circle, come back, and salute the field. One of his parents said, "Gee, they really look like they mean business, don't they?" At his grandmother's house nobody turned on the radio. They went down to see some friends in Perris. One friend walked in and

said, "Well, what do you think of the war?" They said, "What war?" Then the man told them about the Japanese bombing Pearl Harbor.

And my father laughed at this memory, being just twelve then, remembering going to school the next day. I bet he stood around and shot the breeze with the other seventh graders about the surprise attack being so close to them in California. I bet they boasted about what they would do if the Japanese navy landed on their beaches. I bet their older brothers volunteered and came home in flag-draped coffins or still standing, forever changed.

His father, Robert Gabriel Neely, was exempt from the war because he was 34 at the time. The California Electric Company didn't want him to join the military because he knew as much about running the electrical plant as he did about accounting. He remembered his cousin Ed Monroe joining the Navy's V5 program, and they sent him to college after serving on a destroyer. His uncle Welman Emerson went to war on a destroyer in the Pacific, and a friend, Merle Marklin, went to the war in Europe, but my father couldn't recall exactly where. A little boy might not remember the geographical locations far away in Europe and islands in a big ocean. Their good friend Lt. Commander Richard Skeen flew jets. He crashed, was never found, and is still listed as missing.

After all of this time my father still seems incredulous that these soldiers didn't come home, as though, if he could just get back to California, those men might show up. If he is not there, then they must not be there too. I do not ask my father that existential question. He would think it was silly.

When I am in the presence of my family, I might as well be four years old, talking to my upside down table, pretending it was Mighty Manfred on *The Tom Terrific Show* from *Captain Kangaroo.* When I was little, I had many, many interesting conversations with that table, its dog feet in the air. Mighty Manfred was a fine listener. Mulan didn't play with her father much either; her chores came first. China has never held in high esteem objectives for entertainment or the relationship of daughters to anyone.

The next question had my personal agenda written all over it--the oppression of people and social injustice. I was pushing a sensitive button between us; it was a risk. He could have stopped the interview then and there. We have decided, in a silent kind of way, long ago, to agree to disagree about religion, race, politics, child rearing . . . kinds of wine . . . shades of beige . . . ad infinitum. The agreement to disagree, however, is not that simple, affable, or affirming.

I asked, "What kinds of things did you see happening to Japanese people and their families in California during World War II?" He didn't lose a beat and jumped right in: "Well, of course, they all went to internment camps." And he could remember afterwards there were two boys, Japanese boys that he went to grammar school with. He always remembered their nicknames: Popeye and Wimpy, like the cartoon sailor and his sidekick who always wanted someone to buy him a hamburger if only he could pay them tomorrow. After World War II was over, they returned to Riverside, and they told him about going to grammar school there in the camps. And as he tried to remember the details of their schooling behind barbed wire, he repeated, "For the life of me, I can't remember their real names. When the other children at his school called Popeye a Jap, he didn't know what a Jap was. He just tried to "beat the fool" out of them. But he didn't know what a Jap was. But you know, they moved them all out. Then most of them came back."

My father remembered that his mother always bought vegetables from the Japanese farmers out there where they set up their little roadside stands. I could believe that. I have heard stories about my American grandmother driving her car past three or four Mexican stands to get to the stands of those Japanese people. My grandmother stacked her ethnicities up like cord wood: Native Americans (because her family was from this group), then Asians, then Irish, then

Italians, then Blacks, then Mexicans. I bet she was surprised when my father brought home a full-blooded Italian bride.

My parents buy their vegetables now from the Vietnamese farmers among the other stands at the Agricenter in Memphis. The more we don't want to be like our parents, the more we are. I bet that's an adage in Chinese, too. I bet Mulan could not have married one of the Mongols or a Hun. The parents response would have been exile or death. Parents don't like it when you marry someone they don't like. Ask Romeo and Juliet. Ask Wallace Simpson. Ask me.

My father did not know who farmed their land when the Japanese farmers were in the camps. And when he said this, he was a little surprised that he had not considered this idea before. I think that's what scares my parents the most: I make them think about different angles and possibilities. In their eyes, that is not a positive attribute of mine. It gets me into trouble. It makes me ask the wrong kind of questions. Of course we don't talk about this conflict, so I am just guessing: they have raised me to be an excellent guesser. I am a good teacher because I teach exemplary guessing skills. 112,000 displaced Japanese people are not a guesstimate.

What made my father enlist in the Navy? My guess is that he wanted to piss off his own father. I did not offer that as a possible response. I cannot say the word *piss* in their house. I

cannot say *booger* or *crap*. The cat next door has a black mark under its nose. His name is Booger. My mother renamed him Charlie but didn't tell the neighbors because that would be rude. It's their secret because they don't say that word. It's not commendable.

My father had wanted to be a naval aviator ever since he could remember. And his father was not happy when his son came home and surprised him with the news that he had enlisted during the Korean War. He was going to aviation electronics school at the time. My grandfather thought it was very foolish for him to be flying when he could have finished electronics school. It was the solid plan, the right thing to do. He left for the Navy on my grandmother's birthday. I want to believe that really pissed his parents off, for him to choose his own path.

My father has a great sense of humor. If I can make him laugh, I have gotten as close to him as is possible. So the next question was a little leading. I wanted him to tell me the crazy things he did in boot camp. From behind me, I could feel my mother's derision form into a storm cloud and move from her chair, through me, and settle over him. There would be no divulging of the good stuff on that day, just the basic information.

His friend, Charlie Shepherd, and he went to boot camp in San Diego. They left Riverside (California) on June 5th of 1950, and joined Company 389. They felt very lucky they "got a real good chief" as their commanding officer. I guess everyone needs father figures.

My father and one other guy in boot camp were in their twenties, the old men of the camp. The rest of the guys were teenagers. He told me that he couldn't remember any real funny things that happened there. That was not a good lie. The tornado funnel that is my mother had touched down.

He did mention the first liberty they got. The guys decided they wanted to go to Las Vegas. San Diego to Las Vegas was a pretty good road trip by bus, 500-600 miles, and they got into some bad weather coming back. The three guys who came back late into camp were AWOL because they hadn't checked into the barracks. My father was the assistant recruit CPO so they didn't report them as AWOL, but the recruits didn't know that. He said the three men thought they were going to the firing squad. He thought that was funny, even thought it happened almost sixty years ago. I think some men do that as a sport: laugh at someone's fear. Girls, not so much.

I asked about being homesick, being far from home, living with strangers. I bet Mulan had to deal with being in close quarters with smelly boys too. She never shared her

homesickness, not for twelve years. No crying. Crying gives the secret away. Crying means you are not tough enough to be worthy of honor. And while that is a big fat lie, it is the lie we tell ourselves to keep ourselves together in the family, in the classroom, on the battlefield, in life in general: There is no crying.

My father told me that many of the guys in his camp had never lived in barracks before. He had worked for the California Forestry Department when he was a teenager, fighting myriad forest fires in southern California and had been away from home every summer. He remembered going to the chief about one recruit, saying, "We've got to do something. I'm afraid I'm going to find him hanging by the . . . something in there." He remembered that they sectioned him out. My father said, "That guy was by no means ready to go off in the Navy. He cried a lot, and that wasn't good for the rest of the men to see. He was from San Diego so he was really already home." My father didn't know whether or not this man got liberty, but they were really afraid that he was going to commit suicide.

I had never talked to my father about suicide. It is the worst mortal sin in the Catholic Church, the ultimate sin of despair. There is nothing to reconsider, but with this answer, I saw him trying to add some unusual compassion to something greater than a SNAFU--situation not

quite normal, but all fucked up nonetheless. I didn't offer any introspective thoughts. I am not often quiet, but I have learned I can be.

My father has lived in many different places because the Navy and Fate placed him there. And yet, he has talked about these different places during my lifetime as if they were magical destinations for adventure. Odysseus never had it so good. From San Diego he came to Millington (Tennessee). From Millington he went to Pensacola (Florida) to pre-flight school. They brought in girls from over in Georgia for dancing. I could feel my mother thinking: dancing, my eye. They tried to get to Mardi Gras from Pensacola, but they only got as far as Biloxi, Mississippi, "We never bought a drink," my father said. People told them, "Your money is no good here in coastal Mississippi." My father said he got "as drunk as Cooter Brown," a phrase he learned from living in Memphis. People in California have no idea who Cooter Brown is; whereas, in the South know Cooter Brown very well. Legend has it that Cooter (sometimes spelled Cooda) Brown was a man who lived on the border between the North and the South during the War Between the States (the Civil War). Since he didn't want to fight for either army, he stayed drunk all the time. When someone is said to be as drunk as Cooter Brown, that person is three sheets to the wind.

From pre-flight my father went to Milton, north of Pensacola, where they went to AT school to learn to fly. Commander Lindsey, his flight instructor from New Orleans, bought him a bottle of Chivas Regal Scotch when he soloed. That label of scotch was a dollar extra, and he has been drinking it ever since. From there he went to Soffley Field (Florida), where the Navy cadets went to learn formation flying. He was at Cory Field where the Navy taught gunnery skills. Then the sailors drove to Barron Field near a little town in Alabama. That's where the cadet pilots in the flight school did carrier-qualifying work. When I asked him about putting photographs of girlfriends in the cockpit, he said that cadets were not entitled to have personal items on the plane. I think that question came from the movies in my head.

My father's father died from a sudden heart attack while he was stationed in Pensacola. He received a two-week emergency pass to go home. He offered very few details about that time, and I had no follow-up questions about the death of my grandfather. Like battle wounds, my father and my grandmother carried the grief and the resentment deep and silent.

The next question introduces the greatest and most tragic story of my father's life: fabulous because he lived to tell it, tragic because he has mourned this loss every day since it happened. He was flying an F6F . . . couldn't see anything but water . . . turned on the rudder to slide it over . . . thought he was right over the deck . . . couldn't see anything but water. The

next thing he knew, here came the island. So my father, a Navy cadet for a few more minutes, folded the wing up and landed the plane half on the carrier and half in the water. He almost flattened the fireman on the deck, but the plane was out "way ahead" of him, higher in the air than the man thought he was.

After he cracked up the plane on the carrier, the US Navy gave my father the cut. When he went to see the admiral, he said, "Son, we don't know what side you're on, so we'll just let you go."

My father added that he saw the admiral's grave one of the times he and my mother went to Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. Right then, my father's voice was the thinnest, the most pained of the day. This one event had colored the rest of his life. If he hadn't crashed, he wouldn't have married my mother. He wouldn't have had me. I wouldn't have been around to torture my sister or love that dachshund or marry the love of my life. We would have missed misunderstanding one another.

Right after the accident, my father went to New York because there was no way for the Navy to keep him as a pilot. He couldn't fly anymore, so they assigned him to another ship. The Navy had a carrier, *The Bennington*, that they were re-conditioning and taking out of mothballs, and they needed a crew for her. *The Bennington,* sailing from New York and down

the coast, had been landside, eight or nine months. Then the ship ran sea trials out off the coast, taking on a marine squadron. Two months later, in Mayport, Florida, they released my father from active duty. And he went home to California to get ready for a wedding in Memphis.

After he left the ship, it sailed to Gitmo. Off the Cuban coast, *The Bennington*'s boiler exploded and killed over one hundred sailors and injured more than three hundred men onboard. The men were locked up down below. My father said, "I would have been on the deck, so I would have been all right no matter what." I think he said that to make the horror on my face go away because I had not heard that story before. Men locked down below, blown up and drowned like the second-class passengers on the Titanic, a tragedy in peacetime, a statistic in wartime.

When I was a little girl, I used to watch *McHale's Navy* with Ernest Borgnine with my father. It was a television show about reconditioning a ship with a misfit crew. My father loved that program. They seemed like a ship of fools to me, a ship of buffoons, but to him *PT-73* must have represented a ship like *The Bennington*, one rebuilt with new possibilities for sailors who needed second chances.

The next question involved another poking of the conservative bear my father relishes as his persona much like the bear on the California state flag: What did you think of MacArthur desire to invade China during the Korean War? My father answered with some thoughtful

analysis that MacArthur had been in that situation over there for years and years, that he knew what was going on, but "It's all second guessing now." He said Truman didn't want to get into a confrontation with the Chinese or Russia. He's right about that, but I wondered what my father said at the time to men who don't remember where they stood in the gauzy shadows of history or in the bright lights of hindsight written by the winners.

I asked the next question about the history of my parents before they got married. I knew this was a chance for my mother to jump in with her tidbits. They met while my father was going to school in Millington (Tennessee). His friend, Chuck Shepherd, and he were in the same class. Chuck was going through AT school, and my father followed through about two weeks behind him because the Navy held him in San Diego, since he had requested the flight program. And he guessed the Navy waited until his grades were sent before they shipped him to Tennessee, so they had put him on burial detail for about two weeks. Then they sent him to Millington, twenty-five miles north of Memphis.

For the first Christmas they were in Millington, they had travelled downtown to the Catholic Club where they met Mrs. Jones at a USO function. They discovered that she and her husband had lived in Elsinore, California, a town very close to Riverside where my father grew up. She knew of a nice couple that wanted two sailors to come share Christmas dinner with

them. And, besides that, they had a couple of cute daughters. My father said, "Heck, that sounded good to us." My mother rolled her eyes in the background.

My father and Chuck went to the Fastabend's house for that first Christmas. And Chuck met Carol and her sister, Mary Jo, who was very cute but also very young, 13 or 14. While they were at Carol's house for dinner, he didn't remember whether Carol called Dorothy, my mother, or whether Dorothy called Carol, but he got on the telephone with her. And that's how he met her. He couldn't remember whether she came over that day or not, but somewhere along the line, she was there . . . and they went dancing at The Rosewood, out on Highway 61. She'd just had a perm. It smelled to high heaven.

Of course, my mother wanted this part to be edited out, straight away. I did not oblige her. My father thought that was a scream. He takes his triumphs where and he can.

He left Memphis in June 1953, after six months, but before he left, he saw my mother if not every weekend, almost every weekend. His friend, Chuck, had brought back his car, but they rode the bus to see the girls. He didn't remember how they got to The Rosewood.

My mother doesn't do buses. She must have really liked that handsome sailor with blond curly hair who was not Southern, not Catholic, and not Italian. My Italian grandmother did not like him and stopped talking to my mother for six months. She didn't date anyone else even in

the shadow of my grandmother's cyclonic wrath. You have to be a little stubborn to be brave in the face of adversity. My mother has a little Mulan in her too.

My father left to go back to California in March. He sent her a letter every day for fifteen months. She kept them all of these years in the attic. Over four hundred letters are in a taped-up box marked EXPLOSIVES. She said that we could open the box "when we pass." She said that she couldn't find them to let me see one because the attic was too dusty. I was thinking: dusty, my eye.

My father goes to monthly meetings at the American Legion and the Knights of Columbus to share war stories. . The American Legion finances searches for MIA's, guys missing in action from Vietnam. They have no idea what has become of them, dead or alive, or even if the soldiers are still being held. The US Government still finds mass graves in the jungle in Vietnam from time to time when their government gives permission. The US Army found a mass grave in France from World War II in 2010. The Legion likes to give closure to the survivors and to the families if they can.

The Chinese don't look for graves to give closure to their people; there are too many of them. Mulan never was on that burial detail. The Chinese in 1968 were not on that detail either. My parents don't know anyone who was killed in Vietnam. I do. They have no idea what

58,000 dead soldiers means to a generation not in the business of war support. They were little kids in World War II. They grew up saying yes to everything their government proposed as compliant behavior neatly wrapped up as loyalty packages. The US was in the business of war support, from 1961 to 1975, the years I was growing up in their home. My parents supported the Vietnam War. Even after My Lai. Even after the invasion of Cambodia. Even after Vietnam reunited as a communist country. Even after Even after Even after.

Even Mulan would have been disappointed about her own side doing plenty of damage in China's future. The Communists starved 20 million of their own people from 1958 to 1963, during the Great Leap Forward. I wonder how Mulan would have reacted to Mao and Lan Ping. When his wife was a young actress, she played the part of Nora, in *A Doll's House*. She loved Scarlett in *Gone With The Wind*. In her later years, her staff had to chase away noisy birds and cicadas: no helpful chirping cricket friend for her. They had to chase away the hatred of the Chinese people. No Mulanic legend for her.

My parents took a bus trip with the church to Washington D.C. to see the Vietnam Was Memorial. Three guys who had served in World War II joined the group of senior citizens to see the jagged black wall of engraved names, reflecting the 58,000 men and women who died in the Vietnam War or the American War as the Vietnamese call it. Another two or three of them

were from the Korean War, Desert Storm, or from the Gulf Wars. All the rest of the group served in Vietnam.

My parents were more than a little surprised that I married my high school sweetheart thirty years after high school. He brought five boys with him. Two of those boys have been to Iraq. One is in Afghanistan now and the other will go in winter. They are army guys, one an officer, one enlisted. One of my former daughters-in-law, also an army officer, was in the medical corps with her husband during his second tour. She was very brave. She had to dress in uniform like all the men, but they knew she was a woman the entire time she was there. They thought she was important every day for one year. My father was so proud when they were all over there at the same time, hanging three golden stars on their front door. His head was a little higher, his step a little brisker. He believed that they served their country, that they learned a little something, that they did some growing up, just like him. Just like him.

Mulan went away for twelve years as a soldier, dressed like a boy. Her comrades had no idea she was a girl and then a woman. She had to climb fences. She had to camp and hike in the mountains. She didn't give up having sex for twelve years because she had a baby and gave it away. I wonder how that worked out when it came to men keeping secrets. She rode her horse fast. She made pads, bloodied them, and buried them every month. She was successful away

from home. Although relegated to a 50-line poem, her legend and, therefore, the honor of her father, have lasted since the sixth century.

My father never questioned the reason why the US Army sent women to Iraq. I was surprised that he didn't hate the idea of women in the military, as long as they fit into his idea of what the rules have always been, as long as those girls were non-combatant. He couldn't even finish the sentence: "Just not sure that a woman . . ." He knew that the Navy accepted women pilots, and he also mentioned that they showed no difference between them, that they went into combat. How about that. He didn't know that he would feel very comfortable if he were a commanding officer ordering a woman to go into battle. I would hope that if he were a commanding officer, he wouldn't feel comfortable ordering a man to go in harm's way as well. When I asked him about having a woman as a commanding officer, he didn't flinch, but he also didn't look up to answer, "That wouldn't bother me."

My father would go to Guam and the other battlefields in the Pacific if he could visit any historical battlefield because that was where he would have gone if he had gotten his wings. He looks up at the sky when planes cross over the house until he can no longer see them. We gave him a flying lesson for his 75th birthday present. The flight instructor documented the flight

information right next to the last trip entry he made in flight school. My mother had kept the flight book with the letters in the box marked, Explosives.

The only question that my father seemed to sidestep was the one about the radical changes that happened to friends and family after they got back from war, a veritable gold mine of stories. Then I remembered that these stories would be like gossip for him, betraying a code of courage and privacy. Generations of Americans have hidden behind alcohol and honor to keep their horrors like buried secrets. He didn't want to hear about my stepson, David, who needed to talk to someone after cradling the head of a soldier who died in his arms. My father didn't want to listen how David felt when the US Army lined up on the Iranian border to draw a line in the sand in 120 degree heat, and then they had to back off and retreat because the entire Persia showed up. It was fucking Persia.

So instead my father told me a story about shooting birds. He knew a guy, Allen Hill, who was two years ahead of him in the flight program, and he stuck out his thirty years and came out as an admiral. They used to shoot pheasants out of season in high school. Maybe once or twice the boys would hit one when the birds would pop up their little heads. He bet they spent hundreds of dollars in ammo. The state game warden, who lived two doors down, had a pet pheasant in a pen named Goldie. As long as they didn't shoot Goldie, he left them alone. He

remembered Al saying that the only thing wrong in Korea was that it was never fought as a war. My father said that nobody was owed a living for anything especially soldiers.

The winners write and retell the stories, the histories, the myths and the lies. How Mulan's story got repeated, saved and honored is beyond me. It must have been a song sung in the quiet silence of oppression many times by many women over the centuries to their girl children, maybe while their toes were broken and wrapped under their feet, bound and oozing blood. Girls can learn lots of songs if they can't run very far.

When my father described his experience with military funerals, he had no idea who the dead soldiers were. He went to my cousin's son's funeral last year, Marine, suicide, but no one ever mentioned that again. Mal Tedford, a friend he went to high school with and his roommate at Barrow Field, was killed doing carrier quals about a week before he did his. He thought it was ironic that the chaplain had asked Mal if he was married. He explained, "They didn't want married people. Marriage cluttered your mind." They had to pack up all his clothes to be sent home to his mother, not his wife. My father said, "That was kind of tough."

I had one interview question on the sheet that I didn't ask my father. I didn't ask him if he was going to have a military funeral. He's eighty-one, and thinks about death too much as it is. I can't even fucking type this without the words swimming away.

Piss and Crap. I say these words in frustration, and we know Mulan must have said them too: 存心折騰 and 廢話

Mulan had to put thousands of miles between her family and her to bring her father honor and enlightenment about her courage in the war; they couldn't understand these things in the same room at the same time. My father and I can't understand anything in the same room at the same time either, but we're doing the best we can. I have had more time with my father than Mulan had. And she had more time away than I have had. She is a legend. I struggle to keep the conversations going.

Benjamin Franklin once said there was never a good war or a bad peace.
What are your thoughts on that, Daddy?

And Bob Neely answered: "I'm sure that there was never a good war. But if there's peace, I think that's wonderful . . . anything peaceful is not bad."

adrenaline gets me through. and showing up. and instinct. and serendipity. and t-shirts and comfortable clothes. i need sacred space for me and my bag in the corner across from everyone else. every mother of every boy i dated or married offered the same criticism about me: not warm, not sweet. except for sex and the last five years. white medicine makes my temperature rise and burns off cancer and my youth. the ob-gyn doctor says my body still wants to have a baby, but the oncologist says no, let's jettison that body right into menopause. the last time i weighed this much I had a baby the next day. take tamoxifen for five years. then the cancer won't come back. maybe. now the hair falls out in clumps in the bathtub or does not grow fast or at all unless the curls come in metal-gray and wolf-white and velcro-course. my hair curled velcro-brown since birth, matted with sweat and mildew from riding my tricycle up and down the street when i wasn't talking to mr. green jeans and mighty manfred, the upside-down table in the playroom, its unhairy legs in the air. black before i came to mexico, my hair covered my shoulders, made me vanish into its darkness. before that i vanished into the eight-inch scar that runs from my right armpit to my nipple: four surgeries and thirty-three rounds of radiation. if you think of me as lopsided you might be right. you might be looking too close. you might be looking at, as my husband says, the cute one. my thoughts lie beneath the surface of things. i

take in and i combine. but this month i vanish into the hair on my head that makes me look, as my mother said, haggard. like the hooded gnarled but not wiser crone. i beg the stylist to put the blonde streaks back into my hair, to put the caramel back into my unflavored life. the black hair provides a mask, the blond hair provides a frame to compete with the young writers, the ones with the natural blond, brown, and red hair who might understand a rapunzel allusion one day or see star wars for the first time this year. hurry up gets me through. and getting work out on time. and finishing no matter when i start. yeah, i can manufacture honesty about other people--their hair and their needy excuses and their writing--every day all day. able to look straight ahead naked in the mirror without flinching at the changes over time? any day now.

thread

churri--english has no word for this italian concept--something out of place, an errant thread: one single string hanging from a new but not an ugly sweater, a pitiful gathering of hair not thick and long enough to be tied into a ponytail, a baby boy's genitalia, hanging out of his diaper perhaps a portent of greater things to come like larry bell's nads hanging out of his shorts on the golf course during the club tournament in 1974, mauve linen scum on the top of hot chocolate that turns grown men into screaming little girls; lint, but not lipstick, on a man's freshly pressed shirt, blistered sunburn skin in translucent sheets not yet quite completely peeled off of a shoulder, a clothing tag peeking out from the dress back of a family member but not a stranger, a long wiry black hair on the chin of an elderly woman who was never supposed to grow too frail to see it.

the definition suggests how things can go missing, remarkably wrong if not taken care of when they are but a little out of bounds; however, this definition does not include: a pimple, a woman who might want your husband for more than one reason, a man who makes the tour buses wait in teotihuacan for two extra hours, cell phones ringing at inopportune times, a yo-yo that cannot wind its way back up, asian tourists in mexico, ice

floes of congealed olive oil and herbs on the surface of cold soup to be incorporated when heated and not skimmed off to throw away, catholics and muslims on the buckle of the bible belt, horizontal stripes on fat people, two men carrying huge mirrors and framed art down a dusty street , oil in ocean water and ocean life, a lump in any breast, trash on the highway, tiny urchin children sniffing and scratching and screaming in a restaurant, butters and jesus in south park, peanut butter and jelly in one jar, my husband's ex-wife on the phone, my ex-husband on the planet, paper napkins when ribs are on the menu, broccoli in a friend's teeth, a tag hanging out of a stranger's shirt at the airport, a snakeskin shed in the middle of a path in the woods, a leaky cartridge ink pen in the pocket of a white uniform shirt with peterpan collars, tortilla chips with sour cream, *queso fresco*, and onions for breakfast, rat blood on a golden retriever's nose, margin notes written in a hardback book, forks not placed on the left-hand side of the plate, a rusty nail sticking out of a sunken piece of wood in the summer grass, fireworks pointed at the house next door, an unripe avocado, a white half-slip that should not be lost at school for any reason, the pile of dog shit the dachshund produces on the white shag carpeting under the exact middle of the immense dining room table, a ranch-dressing covered grasshopper in my green salad legs still twitching, barbeque pizza at the PETA luncheon, a stranger's eyes on my cleavage,

flipflops at church, the little mermaid story where she falls in love with the first boy she meets and then commits suicide, racists, honey bees at restaurants, rides that kill children at amusement parks, brussels sprouts on my husband's plate, earrings made from the teeth of elvis' dog.

churri--my family has never known the spelling and the correct pronunciation of this italian word. we almost know the phonetic information about the other italian words we use usually to rear children who are out of place: for someone who is too talkative, a parrot, *pappagallo*; someone who is a busybody, an ass on fire, *culo flamme* or a dancing goat, *ballo capra*; a stubborn person, an ass, *asino*; a hard head, *testa dure;* a hyper child, a monkey, *scimmia*.

not heard nearly enough: pretty face, *bella faccia*.

this one, this one, this one here, *questo qui.*

Channeling Ferlinghetti's 'Autobiography'

I am leading a quiet life at the Hacienda de las Flores every day watching the waiters in the hotel restaurant ignore the time and the ways that Americans want their eggs. I am leading a quiet life in room seventeen. I am an American. I was an American girl. I read Nancy Drew and became a girl scout in the suburbs of Memphis. I thought I was one of the children in Mary Poppins, speaking with a British accent for months and imagining the Thames. I had a baseball glove and a pink Schwinn bike. I got the glove because it came free in a Westinghouse washing machine that my father sold. I won the bike because I entered a raffle at the service station on the corner and the manager put the fix in but I didn't know until twenty years later. I can still remember going to the cemetery every Sunday and playing on the tombstones so I wouldn't have to watch my grandmother cry. I had a happy childhood. I saw Italian women cook every day. I looked for Odell, my grandmother's black maid, under the dining room table where she went to hide when storms and my grandmother's anger came down with their lightening and thunder. I did not get caught stealing a red wooden skateboard because I hid it and rode it on the next street over, until it split in two, but not until it got stolen from me. I chopped the limbs off of twenty-six Christmas trees that I dragged home, or I told my daddy I would, because we had a new fireplace and needed wood. I landed on my feet when I climbed trees and fences. I have seen a

black girl reach to touch my hair at the same time I reached to touch hers. I have seen my grandfather smoke a cigarette through a hole in his throat. I am rereading *The Road*, the resulting journey of what happens when many people make the wrong decisions at the same time. I have seen garbagemen and Elvis when I was riding my tricycle. I have not been to the Tuileries since last summer, but I still keep thinking of going to Mexican beaches and Canadian strawberry farms. I have seen sanitation workers on TV walk down the streets of Memphis behind a minister whom we killed even though we did not pull the trigger. I have eaten the best Chinese food in London. I have heard fireworks in Mexico for Lucy's election for many nights in a row. I do not want to like it here in San Miguel de Allende in Mexico, and I will go back where I came from to see less oppressive poverty. I too have ridden trains trains trains. I have travelled among women, not knowing or caring if they liked only women. I have been in California with my American grandmother, Mickey and Goofy and Fresca. I was in England after John Lennon was killed, accused of his murder by passengers on the tube who loathed me because of my American gun laws. I have been in awe when my students stole baby Jesuses out of the mangers and grew up to be decent human beings. I have seen the spirit of the holy in my child's face singing and the laughing women at Mexican restaurants and outside in the square still laughing in the middle of begging with their mouths empty of teeth and of nourishment. I

have heard the sound of my yelling at night. I have wandered lonely as a crowded mob on New Year's Eve in London. I am leading a quiet life in San Miguel de Allende every day watching the world walk by in its mismatched sandals.

I once started out to Dolores Hidalgo to buy pottery but ended up eating vanilla ice cream in the main square. That *cerveza* ice cream was much too much for me to even consider. I have engaged in bus singing, Styx and Rembrandts. I flew too near the pyramid of the sun. I bet I'll have to give up my seat to an old *abuela*, I heard my friend state. I am looking for the name of the guy who sings, *Oh Baby I Love Your Way* but never remember Peter Frampton's name on my own. I am looking for the porn at *La Cucaracha* that patrons never watch. The bartenders should be better observers. Home is where *I'll Be Missing You*. But Mother never told me: I need to sneeze. I didn't bring a tissue. I guess I need to use my sleeve. Phil-Collins weary, I wait for Godot and Flaubert and Lorca and Neruda and Atwood and Kingsolver. I sing in churches even when I do not know the words. I have seen the peppers and the barrels of beans. I have seen the mass in the Mexican cathedral where the people gathered in tight throngs like midnight mass in America, stuffed in pews, kneeling on broken tile and broken compromises, making too many little children be still and too quiet. I have heard my friend cry: Little Stevie Winwood? Dead? No! I have heard an argument over an angry salad--growl, grrr. I have

heard the French play classical music in their parking garages, but not in Mexico because there are no parking garages. I have slept in my hotel room while my friends peered at naked lovers through a window on the street. I have heard my daughter say: you just missed a thousand people. I have worn dirty blue jeans and walked up to the river that was empty except for quiet sludge. I have dwelled in only one city, Memphis, where trees and houses and lives were cut down to build expressways that never happened. What old men what collection plates what crying children! What old women with missing teeth, lives lost among roasted corn and mayonnaise and cell phone vendors! I have seen the statue of the priest who screamed and started the Mexican Revolution in 1810, Miguel Hidalgo, riding his horse in the middle of the square, pointing peasants the way to freedom from Spain and France but not toward birth control. I know that RUSH did not sing *Domo Arigato, Mr. Roboto*. I have heard a hundred housebroken happy endings. They should all be ditched. It is long since I was a Catholic schoolgirl in a plaid uniform with a wool blazer that smelled like spaghetti meat grease on rainy days when I had to sit in the cafeteria at lunch or like weed when I didn't.

I am leading a quiet life in the streets of San Miguel every day reading the Latin words in the Mexican churches. I have read the menus from cover to cover and noted and tasted the same food, deluded into believing the international differences between crepes and blinis and

quesadillas. I read the newspaper daily, looking for a movie, a bar, an uncurtained window. I hear Mexico singing on the bus, *I'll Be There For You*. One could tell that this bus is the same as an Indian or a Canadian train. I read song lyrics every day and hear my students wallow in the sad plethora of self-importance. I see where Neil Sedaka still feels laughter in the rain. I see they made, are making, will make Japanese women say *arimaska* at the end of all their sentences. I see another war coming and my stepsons will, unfortunately, be there to fight it on a continent that I do not want to visit. I have read the writing on the national election wall. I helped others read it and write it. I marched up Hospicio hill choking on air in my tight little lungs but hurried back to the hotel looking out for my rattled friend. I see a similarity between street dogs and me. Dogs are the true observers, walking up to the lowly and the important, peeing on the world in the streets of San Miguel. I have walked down one-way cobblestoned streets too narrow for buses. I have seen a woman take out the comic-book version of *The Book of Mormon* in Spanish to try to convert a stranger, a lonely man on the bus, teaching him to read. I have heard Beatle songs coming out of Spanish mouths, *oblide, oblida*. I have ridden monorails and believed the predictions of Tomorrow Land, crossed the deserts in New and Old Mexico and seen the desolation of the plains and wallowed in the wilds of the backstreets of Memphis with its roaming street kids in their pimped-up rides. I have seen them roll a kid down

three flights of school stairs, rupturing his spleen for gang initiation. I am the hippie woman. I was a little white woman in a big black school. I suffered not at all because I could get back in my convertible and go home. I am an American. I have a passport. I did suffer in public but only at piano recitals. And I'm not too young to die. I am a self-made woman after attending four years at an all-girl Catholic high school. And I have myriad plans for the future perfect. I am in line at Walgreens for medications that I do not know how to pronounce or spell. I may be moving on to Mexican places in my dreams, but my feet stay planted on the slanted and broken Memphis sidewalks. I am not only a playwright. I am not a plain Jane. I am an open book to my golden retrievers. I am leading a quiet life in Memphis during the school year, contemplating room 17 at the Hacienda de las Flores in San Miguel de Allende for four weeks in the summer. I am an intricate part of the 190-page body of work called the first draft of my thesis. I have wandered alone in various European and Canadian cities but not Mexican ones. I have leaned on drunken shoulders, mine as well as those of others. I have written wild prose without capital letters. I am the woman called Yoda, someone who is short and wise and dresses badly. I was there in my night-bramble dreams. I suffered getting through the corn labyrinth. I have sat in uncomfortable desks in the inner-city high schools of Memphis. I have sat in wobbly and splayed plastic chairs, like foals trying to stand, in the middle school in San Miguel. I am a

streak of the moon. I am a Mexican hill from where poets run down and away. I invented a recipe for Brie with apricot preserves and horseradish after watching my friend make up a movable feast out of nothing in my refrigerator and pantry. I am a frozen lake in the mountains of Colorado, and I wonder too, like Holden, where their ducks go. I am a word in a chasm of illiteracy and complacency. I am caught between a mountain of plays and a molehill of prose. I am a raid on the quiet. I have dreamt that both of my breasts went missing but my body and soul lived to tell the tale. For I am a Tennessee moonshine still of storytelling. I am a Mississippi riverbank of narrative threads. I am a question mark on fire on a Unitarian lawn still burning. I fear a similarity between the grandmothers begging in San Miguel and myself as a grandmother in Memphis. I have heard the sound of summer tourists not screaming *namaste* in the rain, slipping and crashing on the sharp cobblestones in many cities on two continents. I have seen the grandmothers at the Jardin offer complicated faces after being stepped over. I understand their hard questions. I am a gatherer of tomatoes and basil in every market that I have ever visited. I have seen how kisses cause lingering liquid pain. I have risked attachment. I have seen the Virgin weep with sadness in San Miguel and St. Theresa burn with ecstasy in Rome. I have seen zoo lions with acres of new quarters, their necks like fur collars wound around like burdensome chains, not seek anything further than the comfortable isolation in their habitual

cagey corners. I have seen Degas' *La Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans* uncomfortable in her wrinkled bronze tights even in Paris. I have heard foreign prayers whispered and cried on the funiculars in Montreal and Guanajuato and Lucerne. I have heard a Nazi siren sing wah-wah wah-wah in Amsterdam in the middle of the Anne Frank tour. I have danced with the lopsided women in the parking lots of the Memphis suburbs in October, joining the breast cancer survivors. Some did not speak loudly. Some had no hair and still sang with their hoarse voices. I am leading a quiet life in Memphis every day, watching the Latino cooks making the fried catfish po-boys, wolfing down sweet potato fries in Midtown, and I have read somewhere, probably in *Siddhartha*, the Meaning of Life yet have forgotten just exactly when to use the essential details. But I am the writer here, and I'll be the writer there in those faraway places to rediscover their recurrence. And I may cause the ears of those who are deaf to listen, learn, and follow directions. And I may throw my writing notebooks into the *paella* pan near Montpellier at the bull ranch in the Camargue or the debris pan in New Orleans at Mother's Restaurant at Poydras and Tchoupitoulas.

And I may write my own epitaph, illuminated in the taxi signs, screeching and squeaking to a hard stop at the intersection of Memphis and Everyplace Else.

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Vita

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